

SUNSET PLAY CENTER, including the bath house, swimming pool, diving pool, wading pool, bleachers, filter house, perimeter walls and fencing enclosing these structures, linking pathways, street level fieldstone retaining walls, and the southernmost portion of the paved allee aligned with Sixth Avenue; Seventh Avenue between 41st Street and 44th Street, Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Constructed 1934-1936; Herbert Magoon, lead architect; Aymar Embury II, Henry Ahrens and others, consulting architects; Gilmore D. Clarke and others, landscape architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 921, Lot 1 in part, and portions of the adjacent public way, consisting of the property bounded by a line extending northerly from the intersection of the western curblineline of Seventh Avenue and the northern curblineline of 44th Street along the western curblineline of Seventh Avenue to the southern curblineline of 41st Street, westerly along the southern curblineline of 41st Street approximately 515 feet to a point on the southern curblineline of 41st Street which intersects with a line extending northerly from the china link fence located approximately 45 feet to the west of the western wall of the Sunset Play Center, continuing southerly along that line and along the chain link fence approximately 570 feet, then westerly approximately 15 feet along a line extending from the chain link fence which runs along the southern side of a playground located west of the western wall of the Sunset Play Center to its intersecting point with the western curblineline of the paved pedestrian path, then following the curvature of the western curblineline of the paved pedestrian path around to the west and extending the line of the curb to a point which intersects with the western curblineline of the paved allee aligned with Sixth Avenue, southerly along the western curblineline of the paved allee to the northern curblineline of 44th Street, and easterly along the northern curblineline of 44th Street to the point of beginning.

On January 30, 2007, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Sunset Play Center (LP-2242) including the bath house, swimming pool, diving pool, wading pool, bleachers, filter house, perimeter walls and fencing enclosing these structures, linking pathways, street level fieldstone retaining walls, and the southernmost portion of the paved allee aligned with Sixth Avenue, Seventh Avenue between 41st Street and 44th Street and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 28). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eleven witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe and representatives of the Municipal Art Society of New York, the Historic Districts Council, and the Society for the Architecture of the City. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has also received letters from New York City Council Member Sara M. Gonzalez and the Modern Architecture Working Group in support of designation. Several of the speakers and letters also expressed support for the larger designation effort of all the WPA-era pools. The site was previously heard on April 3, 1990 and September 11, 1990 (LP-1787).

Summary

The Sunset 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.

Designed by Herbert Magoon, the Sunset Play Center is set within the 24.5-acre site of Sunset Park, located in the neighborhood of the same name and developed as a park at the turn of the twentieth century. Displacing a small lake, play areas and pathways, construction of the Sunset Play Center resulted in a major redesign of the eastern half of the park in order to accommodate the immense new swimming, diving and wading pools complex, bath house, linking pathways, and adjacent play areas. The earlier attractive battered masonry wall, which forms the perimeter of the entire park, was breached on the Seventh Avenue side to accommodate a monumental flight of steps leading up to the play center's main entrance. The play center officially opened on July 20, 1936 and became the sixth WPA pool to open throughout New York City and the first to open in Brooklyn. The design of the bath house entrance is one of the most distinctive features of the Sunset Play Center with its giant corner piers that frame the one-and-a-half-story rotunda. The unusual shape of the rotunda, with its stacked cylindrical brick walls, hints at the remarkable lobby awaiting bathers inside. The standard play center building materials are used here in a particularly distinctive way: decorative bonds and patterning of brick appear at a number of locations, while cast stone diamond shapes and bricks placed in a chevron pattern form a 1930s interpretation of a classical entablature above the grand entranceway and across the entire building. The alternating brick piers and black-painted steel windows (that once were matched by black-painted bricks below) give the impression of a colonnade, which is especially evident when the stacked dogtooth brick piers are lit by the sun.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

History of the Sunset Play Center Site¹

The Sunset Play Center is set within the 24.5-acre site of Sunset Park, which is located in the neighborhood of the same name in the southwest section of Brooklyn along Upper New York Bay. It is believed that the park (and, subsequently, the neighborhood) derives its name from its hilltop views of the sunset.

In the area that is now known as Sunset Park, land east of Fourth Avenue and south of Green-wood Cemetery remained largely undeveloped until the 1890s when the Brooklyn Union Elevated Railway Company² built a Third Avenue extension to their Fifth Avenue line. Opened on October 1, 1893, the eagerly anticipated extension connected the company's Union Depot terminal at 36th Street to stations along Third Avenue from 40th to 65th Streets.

Two years earlier, with the realization that rapid transit would soon bring large-scale development to the area, the City of Brooklyn acquired four blocks between 41st and 43rd Streets and Fifth and Seventh Avenues on May 15, 1891 for use as public parkland. At the time of the acquisition, progressive reformers were advocating the need for parks as a means of improving the health conditions of residents living in otherwise densely populated neighborhoods; as a result, Brooklyn parks such as Winthrop, Bedford and Bushwick were also created in the early 1890s. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* described the Sunset Park site as having "an elevation far above that of the surrounding country, and when the land which immediately borders it is graded down to the street, one of the finest views in the city will be obtained from the well shaded grounds. From Sunset park [sic] there will be a clear view not only of the upper and lower bays, of New York, Jersey City and Staten Island, but of the ocean itself as it stretches out from Sandy Hook."³ To the dismay of local residents, however, major improvements to the park were slow to occur. In 1899 – one year after the City of Brooklyn became a borough of greater New York City in the consolidation of 1898 – the *Eagle* noted that the park lacked proper amenities such as benches, walkways and drinking fountains.⁴ With pressure mounting from the South Brooklyn Board of Trade and other local organizations, Sunset Park began to receive improvements as early as 1901 with the addition of a six-hole golf course. After a resolution was passed by the Board of Estimate to expand the park to its present size, the City of New York condemned the land between 43rd and 44th Streets and Fifth and Seventh Avenues on December 28, 1905. Besides the golf course, original features of the park included new landscaping, rustic retaining walls, a neo-Classical style shelter, a carousel and a "beautiful, clear spring lake on the summit of the hill."⁵

Some of the first beneficiaries of Sunset Park were Polish, Norwegian and Finnish immigrants who settled in the area during the 1880s and 1890s. The opening of the 36th and 45th Street stations on the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company's (BRT)⁶ Fourth Avenue subway line on September 13, 1915 helped develop the neighborhood further as rowhouses, tenements and apartment buildings were built around this time on the blocks surrounding the park. Within the first decades of the twentieth century, Sunset Park became well known for its thriving Scandinavian community; the City's most cohesive Finnish community lived in a section of the neighborhood known as "Finn Town."⁷

Under the auspices of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and his legendary Park Commissioner, Robert Moses, major improvements to Sunset Park were made in the 1930s. By August 1935, the Parks Department had broken ground on the Sunset Play Center, a complex that would include new swimming, diving and wading pools, and an elaborate bath house located in the eastern section of Sunset Park. Other additions planned for the park were concrete bleachers, a comfort station, a pump house, recreational areas for adults and a children's playground. The pool complex would serve not only the residents of Sunset Park, but also those living in other parts of southwest Brooklyn, such as Bay Ridge, Borough Park and Flatbush. Overall enhancements planned for the surrounding park grounds resulted in the removal of the golf course, carousel, shelter and lake. Funding for the various improvements was largely made possible by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of the many public works programs created by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the United States Congress during the Great Depression.

Fiorello LaGuardia, Robert Moses and the New Deal⁸

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,⁹ and its citizens, hoping for change, elected Fiorello H. LaGuardia to the mayoralty of New York City in 1933 as an anti-Tammany Hall reform candidate. A maverick Republican and a five-term congressman from East Harlem, LaGuardia won the mayoral election on the "Fusion" ticket after losing the 1929 mayoral race on the Republican line. The Fusion Conference Committee at first considered running Robert Moses, another Republican, who was appointed Chairman of the New York State Council of Parks in 1924 by his political mentor, Governor Alfred E. Smith, a Tammany Hall Democrat from New York City. However, the committee decided against Moses because of his association with Smith, and chose LaGuardia instead. At the time, Moses was a popular public figure with a reputation as a progressive and as the builder of great parks and parkways like Jones Beach and the Northern State Parkway on Long Island. His endorsement of LaGuardia during the campaign was considered instrumental in securing a victory for LaGuardia. Within a week of the election, LaGuardia chose Moses, a champion of reform politics, as New York City's new Park Commissioner.

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

In the 1920s, Moses was at the forefront of the national recreation movement that began in the first decade of the twentieth century, led by such men as President Theodore Roosevelt and the lesser-known George D. Butler of the National Recreation Association. The movement gained momentum under the administration of President Calvin Coolidge with the organization of the National Conference on Outdoor Recreation (NCOR) in 1924.¹⁰ 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."¹¹ 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.¹² All new projects began in the topographical unit, where a complete survey of the land was prepared. It then moved on to the landscaping unit, where the basic concept for the design was developed. Next, the three units, landscape, architecture, and engineering, collaborated to produce the final design and all the necessary construction documents. The Park Engineer and his aides had to approve all of the plans. Moses himself sometimes stepped in to revise or overrule a design, especially on the larger, more visible projects.

Moses' superior management ability and political savvy allowed him to move projects along very quickly and to produce concrete results, gaining for him much public admiration. However, Moses' personal demeanor was notoriously stubborn and arrogant, and he was known, at times, to disregard the legitimate authority of other governmental agencies. Once, when the Department of Plant and Structures refused to suspend a ferry service that used a terminal in the path of construction of the Triborough Bridge approach road, Moses had his men demolish the terminal while the boat was on the other side of the river. He feuded with President Franklin D. Roosevelt for years, even while Washington was pouring millions of dollars into Moses' own Parks Department. His later battles with and subsequent triumphs over community groups opposed to the routing of the Gowanus and the Cross-Bronx Expressways through their neighborhoods are now legendary. Moses was also known to have been insensitive to people of color, and reputedly tried to restrict access to many of his recreational facilities, including the WPA-era pools.¹³

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 or in the process of being designed.¹⁴ Among them was the Sunset Play Center in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

History of Swimming in New York City¹⁵

The Hudson and East Rivers lining the shores of Manhattan both served as popular bathing spots dating to the Colonial era. Despite extensive contamination resulting from decades of unchecked pollution, the long tradition of swimming in New York City's rivers was still strong at the middle of the nineteenth century. Out of concern for the health and welfare of the people of the city, and particularly of immigrant populations who took 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 pools were required to be watertight and filled with purified water. Nonetheless, as river quality continued to erode, and access to nearby beaches improved, the floating pools gradually disappeared.

In 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 an 1895 state law requiring the construction of such facilities in cities with populations of 50,000 or more. By 1911, twelve new bath houses had been constructed in Manhattan, mostly sited within immigrant neighborhoods. 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 gymnasias in hopes of attracting more patrons. The indoor pools at the bath houses never quite replaced the need or demand for outdoor swimming facilities in the city, and by the 1930s, it was clear that they had not aged well.

When Robert Moses became Parks Commissioner in 1934, only two outdoor pools remained, one at Betsy Head in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and the other at Faber Park on Staten Island. Moses, however, considered the Betsy Head pool "unsanitary" and often lamented its "unattractive, inadequate, and impractical bath houses."¹⁶ Moses, a strong believer in the need for safe bathing in the city, consulted with the heads of the New York City Health and Sanitation Department in July 1934. Finding that only an increase in the

number of swimming pools could ease the existing burden, Moses wrote the following in a press release picked up by the *New York Times*:

It is no exaggeration to say that the health, happiness, efficiency and orderliness of a large number of the city's residents, especially in the summer months, are tremendously affected by the presence or absence of adequate swimming and bathing facilities. We are providing additional wading pools for children as fast as we can...This, however, does not meet the problem of any but small children...It is one of the tragedies of New York life, and a monument to past indifference, waste, selfishness and stupid planning, that the magnificent natural boundary waters of the city have been in large measure destroyed for recreational purposes by haphazard industrial and commercial developments, and by pollution through sewage, trade and other waste...We must frankly recognize the conditions as they are and make our plans accordingly...¹⁷

To Moses, a forerunner in the national recreation movement and an avid swimmer since his university days, a change was desperately needed, and by October 1934, excavations had already begun for the first of eleven state-of-the-art swimming pools. The pools were to be sited near inner-city neighborhoods in order to provide swimming for those who could not easily reach places like Orchard Beach or the beaches of Long Island. In addition to swimming pools, the new centers would incorporate elaborate bath houses, and also provide active adult sport areas, children's playgrounds, and other amenities. The eleven pools opened in the summer of 1936 and quickly gained recognition as being among the most exceptional public facilities constructed in the country.¹⁸ All of the pools featured new bath houses, with the exception of Hamilton Fish and Betsy Head.¹⁹ After the completion of the WPA-era pool complexes, no new public swimming pools were constructed in New York City until the 1970s. Over 1.65 million bathers are thought to have used the new swimming pools in their first summer of use.

The Swimming Pools, Moses, and Segregation in New York City²⁰

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.²¹ 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.

Robert Moses himself has been described as 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."²² 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.²³

It has been alleged that the Parks Department at the time had an active policy of hiring only white lifeguards and attendants in hopes of deterring minority patrons. Whether or not such directives came from Moses himself, the fact remains that the pools were largely segregated at the time of their opening. In the Pulitzer Prize winning biography, *The Power Broker*, Robert Caro writes that "one could go to the [Thomas Jefferson] pool on the hottest summer days, when the slums of Negro and Spanish Harlem a few blocks away sweltered in the heat, and not see a single non-Caucasian face."²⁴ 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."²⁵ Such claims are supported by photographs and video footage from the era, showing that

largely, white and black New Yorkers swam in different pools.²⁶ 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.²⁷

The Design and Construction of the Sunset Pool²⁸

The Sunset Play Center is one of a group of eleven immense outdoor swimming pools opened in the summer of 1936 in a series of grand ceremonies presided over by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Park Commissioner Robert Moses. All of the pools were constructed largely with funding provided by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of many New Deal agencies created in the 1930s to address the Great Depression. Designed to accommodate a total of 49,000 users simultaneously at locations scattered throughout New York City's five boroughs, the new pool complexes quickly gained recognition as being among the most remarkable public facilities ever constructed in the country. The city's pool construction program was reported to have been the most expensive in terms of total cost. Robert Moses, an avid swimmer who had a home near the ocean in Babylon, Long Island, was known to have taken a special interest in the design and construction of bathing and swimming facilities, such as Jones Beach, Orchard Beach and Riis Park, as well as the neighborhood swimming pools.²⁹ As a result of his special attention, along with that of Aymar Embury II and Gilmore D. Clarke, the design and execution of New York City's aquatic facilities in the 1930s were a cut above most other park projects at the time.

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

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

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

In October 1934, the Parks Department announced the start of excavations and site work for several of the new pools. In August 1935, plans for the Sunset Play Center were filed at the New York City Department of Buildings. At this time, WPA workers had broken ground at the site, which would include an Olympic-size swimming pool flanked by diving and wading pools and a one-story brick bath house (with a one-and-a-half story centrally-located rotunda) that could accommodate 4,850 bathers. Construction of the pool complex was completed on time for opening day. 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.³⁰ 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 of the Sunset Play Center on July 20, 1936 marked the first of four WPA pools to open in Brooklyn and the sixth overall to open throughout New York City; an estimated 3,500 people, including "hundreds of vocally enthusiastic children"³¹ attended the event only a week after a heat wave had plagued New York City. (Vastly contradicting the number appearing in the *New York Times*, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported that 50,000 people from all over Brooklyn crowded around the "much anticipated" pool complex to catch a glimpse of the proceedings.³²) The main swimming pool measured 256 by 165 feet and the small semi-circular wading and diving pools at either end each measured 165 feet in diameter. The wading pool, which was free to the public at all times, was (and still is) separated from the rest of the pool complex by a brick wall. After LaGuardia turned on the pool's lights, Julia Peters of the Metropolitan Opera Company concluded the ceremony by singing the Star Spangled Banner.

Long after its opening, the Sunset Play Center continued to be a popular social center for those residents of southwest Brooklyn. Intended to be used throughout the year, plans to convert the main pool for winter use were also made: the pool was drained, temporary stairs were installed, benches were placed along the inside perimeter, and handball, paddle tennis, basketball, volleyball and shuffle board courts were added. Regardless of the time of year, visitors approaching the site at the Seventh Avenue entrance were met by the grand symmetrical design of the bath house and the stacked cylindrical forms of the rotunda. Together with the remaining WPA-era pools, the Sunset Play Center is one of the major achievements of the New Deal in New York City.

The Designers Behind the Planning of Sunset Pool³³

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,³⁴ the Lincoln Tunnel, the Triborough Bridge, and many more.

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

The design of the Sunset Play Center is most commonly attributed to Herbert Magoon, a young staff member who Moses had previously hand picked to design the bath houses at Jones Beach, which opened in 1929. Frustrated with the unimaginative designs submitted by famous architects for the Jones Beach bath houses, Moses was appreciative of Magoon's austere, but nicely detailed proposals. The design of the bath house at Crotona Park, which opened only four days after the Sunset Play Center, is also attributed to Magoon. Born in Milton, Wisconsin in 1898, Magoon graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the University of Minnesota in 1924, after which he was employed by the firm B.G. Goodhue Associates from 1924 to 1928. After his tenure at the New York City Parks Department during the 1930s, Magoon started two firms of his own, Magoon & Barone and Magoon & Salo. By 1962, it appears that Magoon had relocated to Los Angeles, where he was employed as a project architect for William Woollett.

Although Magoon is widely accepted as the designer of the Sunset Play Center, Joseph L. Hautman prepared the majority of the architectural plans and construction drawings on file at the Olmsted Center Archives in Queens. Hautman was born in Cincinnati in 1903, attended the University of Cincinnati from 1922 to 1923, received his degree in architecture from MIT in 1926, and later studied at the Atelier Gromort Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris from 1927 to 1928. Between 1933 and 1936, Hautman was "Chief of Architecture" for the Parks Department, and served as assistant to the Chairman of the Board of Designs for the New York World's Fair of 1939. Hautman joined the already established firm of Voorhees, Smith, Smith & Haines in 1942, where he remained an architect at least through the 1960s.

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 from the Architectural League of New York in 1931. By the time of the Great Depression, Clarke was already established as the most popular landscape architect in public works in America.

His career advanced during the 1930s. Besides being hired by Robert Moses as the Consulting Landscape Architect to the New York City Parks Department, he also became a member of the National Commission on Fine Arts, the New York State Planning Council, and the Board of Design for the 1939 New York World's Fair. In addition to Sunset Park, his work for the Parks Department included Bryant Park, Central Park Zoo, City Hall Park, Orchard Beach, and the Henry Hudson Parkway. He taught landscape architecture at Cornell University from 1935 to 1950, serving as dean from 1939 until his retirement in 1950 and wrote several articles for trade periodicals. In 1935, Clarke joined Michael Rapuano, an engineer and landscape architect, establishing the New York civil engineering and landscape architectural firm Clarke & Rapuano, Inc. Clarke was president of the firm from 1962 until his retirement in 1972. Later in his career, Clarke worked as a consultant on the construction of the United Nations Headquarters in New York and became a Trustee for the American Museum of Natural History.

Subsequent History³⁵

The Sunset Play Center officially opened on July 20, 1936, the sixth of the eleven pools to open throughout New York City and the first to open in Brooklyn. The play center was completed in time for the opening with the exception of some of the finishing details such as the bronze signs at the comfort station, which were not approved until October 1936. There were very few alterations in the years immediately following the completion of the pool complex, although in September 1940 plans were filed for the reconstruction of the parapet and wing walls of the bleachers. In the late 1930s, the connecting pathways were paved with concrete blocks and in the early 1940s new planting and general park rehabilitation, including finishing the grading of the site, lawn renovation, and other landscaping improvements, were completed.

By the late 1970s, many of the WPA-era pools, Sunset Play Center included, had become badly run down, partially the result of the fiscal crisis of the 1970s which hit the Parks Department particularly hard. By March 1981, the Parks Department workforce had dwindled to a record low of 2,900 employees, mostly unskilled and temporary, as compared to the 30,000 parks employees on staff during the Moses administration.

The strain on Parks Department resources was evident in the deplorable conditions of many of its facilities. To address the rapid deterioration of its recreational facilities, in 1977 the Parks Department began a major capital construction program involving more than 500 projects, expected to total more than \$180 million, partly in Federal funds – the first such projects undertaken by the parks system since the fiscal crisis halted such work in 1975, and arguably the most ambitious program to improve the parks since the 1940s. Among the projects planned was a \$10 million plan to preserve Prospect Park, a \$1 million renovation of the Coney Island Boardwalk, and restorations of several WPA-era pools, such as Jackie Robinson (Colonial Park) in Harlem and Betsy Head in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

In 1979, an estimated \$5.8 million was budgeted for the restoration of the Sunset Play Center and in late 1982 or early 1983 work began at the site. Over the next two summers, the pool complex was closed to the public as reconstruction of the bath house, pool and comfort station was undertaken and a new filtration system was installed. On August 8, 1984, a dedication ceremony was held at the Sunset Play Center to mark the completion of restoration efforts and to re-open the pool to the public. The Parks Department called the renovations of the WPA-era pools “an essential part of the revitalization [of] the entire public recreational infrastructure of the city,” helping transform the aging pools back into modern recreational facilities.³⁶ Additional changes to Sunset Play Center include the filling-in of the diving pool to create a volleyball court and, in 1988, the installation of the sunburst spray fountain at the center of the former wading pool. In the bath house lobby, two large murals designed and painted by students from school district 15 were hung above the entrances of the men’s and women’s locker rooms. In the 1980s, the neighborhood of Sunset Park experienced an influx of Asian and Latin American immigrants who, since that time, have become the predominant users of the pool complex.

The WPA-era pools faced a new set of challenges beginning in the mid-1980s, with pools like the Crotona Play Center in the Bronx becoming infamous for vandalism and walkways littered with broken glass. In 1991, Mayor David Dinkins proposed closing the pools as part of a package of budget cuts. Only a donation of \$2 million from a private donor, real estate magnate Sol Goldman, guaranteed the pools would be kept open for at least a portion of that summer; an additional \$1.8 million was still needed to cover the entire nine-week long swimming season. In the mid-1990s, a menacing ritual known as “whirlpooling” had become common throughout the pool system, a practice characterized by groups of teenage boys locking arms and shoulders, churning the water and disrupting the activities of other swimmers, particularly women who often found themselves unwillingly fondled. Several more serious complaints of sexual assault were recorded throughout the pool system in the summer of 1994. With improvements in security staffing and increased vigilance on the part of patrons, many of the problems of the 1990s did eventually dissipate, and by 2003, the pools were once again touted as both extremely safe, and a welcome alternative on a hot summer day.

The Architecture and Site of the Sunset Play Center

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

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

If an architect has any function, it is to coordinate units so that they do a required job and at the same time create a pleasant emotion. Modernists believe that the essence of their work is to do something that has never been done before. They leave off all ornamentation because, they say, the ornaments do not aid the structure to do its job. I suppose some of these architects do not use neckties or buttons when they dress.³⁷

Considering the collaborative nature of the design process of the WPA Play Centers, it is fitting that the design of the Sunset Play Center, like that of the other neighborhood pools, relies on classical forms while also employing a modern vocabulary. As one approaches the bath house from the Seventh Avenue steps or connecting pathways, the one-and-a-half story rotunda with its stacked cylindrical brick walls marks the entrance to the pool complex; its unusual shape hints at the remarkable lobby awaiting bathers inside. A broad flight of stone steps leads to a large entrance that is supported by fluted concrete columns. Diamond-shaped cast stone and bricks placed in a chevron pattern form a 1930s interpretation of a classical entablature above the grand entranceway and across the entire building. Small fountains on granite pedestals in front of glass brick panels originally flanked the entrance. Flemish, English common and header bond bricks as well as other brick patterns embellish each elevation.

The symmetrical façade includes one-story wings on either side of the rotunda. Equidistant stacked dogtooth brick piers that separate wide window bays resemble a colonnade; the header bond bricks directly below each window bay were originally painted black, which would have made the projecting piers stand out even more (the same is true for the west façade facing the pool). The plan of the three pools themselves also harks back to classical traditions as historian Marta Gutman writes that “it seems as if the footprint of an Early Christian basilica had been imprinted on the park landscape in Brooklyn.”³⁸

Description

Plan and Circulation

Sunset Park is bounded by 44th Street to the south, 41st Street to the north, Fifth Avenue to the west, and Seventh Avenue to the east. The Sunset Play Center is located in the eastern section of the park at Seventh Avenue where a stairway forms the main approach to the bath house. Three other entrances to the park in the landmark site are located at 44th Street and Sixth Avenue, the corner of 44th Street and Seventh Avenue and the corner of 41st Street and Seventh Avenue. Pool visitors enter the play center through the double doors on the east façade of the bath house facing Seventh Avenue. Use of the pool complex is now free so patrons do not have to go to the ticket booth once they pass through the entryway; the ticket booth is thus purely ornamental. After entering the bath house lobby, men go to the locker rooms and showers located on the south wing of the bath house and women go to the locker rooms and showers located on the north wing. From there, they enter the pool deck from their respective doors, which are located behind curved brick footbath walls.

Bathers swim in the Olympic-size swimming pool, which measures 256 feet by 165 feet. Bathers may also sit on the concrete bleachers located on the western edge of the pool complex. The diving pool has been filled-in and now serves as a volleyball court. To access the wading pool area, patrons do not go through the bath house since the wading pool is separated from the rest of the pool complex by a brick wall. Instead, patrons enter the wading pool area from the north side of the complex through a metal gate. To play on the handball courts, visitors walk to the area outside and to the west of the pool complex.

The Bath House

The one-story bath house, which is partially built into the slope of the park, employs an I-shaped plan and is constructed of cast stone and Flemish bond, English common bond and header bond bricks. The central one-and-a-half story rotunda is flanked by wings. Unless noted otherwise in this report, all façades are clad in Flemish bond brick, have cast stone bases, non-historic metal coping (historically cast stone) and diamond- and triangular-shaped cast stone and brick chevrons that form a decorative motif at the top of the wall. Except for the hipped roofs on top of the perpendicular wings on the far north and south sides of the bath house, the roof is only visible from a distance.

Rotunda, park side (east façade). Five wide granite steps and bluestone pavers with non-historic metal rails form the entrance to the bath house. A non-historic handicap ramp and metal rails lie to the south of the steps. The rotunda is located between two wide Flemish bond brick piers that are identical in design and materials. They each have a historic metal flagpole, granite base (that used to have a small fountain) and a non-historic polychrome tile panel (historically, the panel had glass bricks and a glass reflector, some of which

is still evident on a panel on the pool side of the rotunda). On each pier there are two metal cleats for the flagpole. Two historic fluted cast stone columns support a cast stone lintel. The three large openings between the columns are covered by non-historic metal bars and mesh; two non-historic metal double doors are located in the middle opening (historically, the space between the columns was left completely opened). There is signage on the metal bars and the wide brick piers. The rotunda is set behind the piers and is clad in English common bond brick. The historic metal letters, "SUNSET / PLAY CENTER" are placed above the diamond and chevron motif and below bricks laid in an upside-down triangular pattern. Two lights are located just below the non-historic metal coping. The setback drum above the main wall is clad in Flemish bond brick and has non-historic metal coping. The clerestory windows that allow light into the lobby are visible from a distance. Barely visible is the Flemish bond brick flue in the center of the drum (this is the flue that is seen in the center of the bath house interior). A ladder is visible on the northern end of the drum.

Wing south of rotunda, park side (east and south façades). A narrow wall has two historic steel windows with metal screens, one on top of the other. The diamond and chevron motif is covered by ivy and continues to the seven-bay wing (plus a one-bay wide projecting elevation) directly to the south (and around the entire building). Each bay has a set of three historic steel windows, which pivot at the bottom sash (henceforth referred to as "steel bottom-sash pivot windows"); the central window has twenty panes and the flanking windows have fifteen panes. Below each set of windows is English common bond brick, which historically was painted black with a red-painted diaper pattern. Stacked dogtooth brick piers are located between each set of windows and below the cast stone lintel. Roof equipment on the roof is visible above the second and sixth bays from the rotunda. The wing then projects outward to form a narrow north facade, which then connects to the projecting one-bay façade that faces east. This facade has a pair of historic steel bottom-sash pivot windows with twenty panes and cast stone lintels and sills. Directly below the windows is English common bond brick (historically painted black with a red-painted diaper pattern). Stacked dogtooth brick piers and cast stone lintels flank the paired windows. The south façade has five bays of historic steel bottom-sash pivot windows; the two outer bays have paired windows (twenty panes each) and the three middle bays have windows in sets of three (the central window has twenty panes and the flanking windows have fifteen panes). Below each bay is stacked header bond, portions of which are painted red, but were historically painted black. A cast stone lintel runs the length of the five window bays. Stacked dogtooth brick piers and cast stone lintels flank the windows. There is no cast stone base. The façade connects to a Flemish bond brick wall that encloses the pool area.

Wing north of rotunda, park side (east and north façades). This section is nearly identical to the wing south of the rotunda except for the following characteristics. To accommodate the slope of the site, this wing has a Flemish bond brick wall that lies below the cast stone water table. On the north façade at the basement level there is a non-historic garage metal door (historically, wood double doors with six-pane glass insets) with a light fixture above. On either side of the door are paired windows that have been filled-in (historically they were nine-pane steel bottom-sash pivot windows). Portions of the wall are painted red. The north façade abuts the light yellow-painted wall, which separates the former wading pool from the rest of the pool complex.

Rotunda, pool side (west façade). The west façade (pool side) of the rotunda is nearly identical to the east façade (park side) of the rotunda except for the following characteristics. The non-historic tile panel to the north of the non-historic metal double doors has a portion of the original glass tile at the bottom quarter of the panel. An aluminum and mesh frame covers it. There are no flagpoles, flags or flag cleats on this façade. Above the lintel of the large entrance is a circular Parks Department sign. The non-historic metal bars and mesh that cover the three large openings replaced original wrought-iron balustrades (the rest of the space was open air). The bronze hanging clock is visible in the central entryway. Signage hangs on the central large opening. A narrow south façade has a non-historic metal door and, above it, a historic steel window.

Wing south of rotunda, pool side (west façade). This wing is fourteen bays wide, plus a one-bay wide projecting elevation. Each bay in the main wing has one historic steel bottom-sash pivot window that has eighteen panes, exposed concrete lintels, blue stone sills and aluminum screens. Below each window is stacked header brick that historically was painted black. Flemish bond brick piers are located between each window bay. Between the ninth and tenth bay from the rotunda, there is a decorative rectangular bronze grille with a floral design. A Flemish bond brick curving footbath wall (with a cast stone base and cap) is located in front of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth window bays from the rotunda. Behind the footbath are two

eighteen-pane windows and one twelve-pane window (which lies directly above non-historic metal double doors that historically were wood doors with a single glass diamond pane; all the doors on this west façade were historically this pattern). The doors lead to the men's locker room. A metal and glass lantern historically was placed on each of the footbath's cast stone caps (toward the edge). The one-bay projecting elevation has historic steel paired bottom-sash pivot windows, exposed concrete lintels, blue stone sills and aluminum screens. Stacked dogtooth brick piers flank the windows and non-historic double doors cut into the southernmost pier. The doors lead to the men's showers. Another footbath conceals the lower half of this elevation and a non-historic yellow-painted metal drinking fountain is located in front of the footbath. Historically, the drinking fountains were located on the granite pedestals that flank the rotunda pool entryway.

Wing north of rotunda, pool side (west façade). This section is nearly identical to the wing north of the rotunda. The doors behind each footbath lead to the women's locker room and showers. To the south of the footbath closest to the rotunda is a non-historic metal door. A decorative bronze grille with a floral pattern is located between the ninth and tenth window bays from the rotunda. In front of the northernmost footbath there is a non-historic yellow-painted metal drinking fountain.

The roof over the wings is visible and there is metal flashing where the roof abuts the brick drum of the rotunda. Plants are located in front of each wing of the park side (east façade) of the rotunda.

The Pool and Deck Area

The enclosed pool area to the east 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 the semicircular former diving pool to the south and the semicircular former wading pool to the north. In the swimming pool there are two islands with triangular caps that house the filtration systems. The entire deck is paved in cement though historically it was paved in brick. There are non-historic lampposts that stand on the deck: five parallel to the bleachers, five parallel to the brick wall separating the former wading pool from the rest of the pool deck, and four parallel to the bath house. Lampposts were not part of the original design.

The historic concrete bleachers have seven rows and five sets of painted-black steps. The wide concrete row at the base of the bleachers was historically laid in herringbone brick. Sloping Flemish bond brick walls capped with cast stone flank the bleachers. The back wall at the top of the bleachers is a combination of Flemish bond brick with cast stone coping and non-historic chain-link fence. Header bond brick is laid where the back wall curves at either end of the bleachers. Underneath the bleachers is the filter house. Three handball courts are located at the center of the bleachers' back Flemish bond brick wall facing the playground. Below the stone coping, light yellow-painted brick on the back wall has been laid in an upside-down triangular pattern and just above the doors and windows there is a course of soldier (header) bricks; historically, black headers in a zigzag pattern ornamented the brick between the triangular pattern and the soldier (header) bricks (this is also true for this same pattern seen on the pump house and former comfort station). To the left of the handball courts the brick wall is pierced by non-historic metal double doors (historically wood). Historically, on either side of the doors were two steel windows with blue stone sills (for a total of four windows), but they are now bricked-in. To the right of the handball courts the brick wall is pierced by a non-historic metal single door (historically wood). Historically, on either side of the door were two steel windows with blue stone sills (for a total of four windows), but they are now bricked-in. Two non-historic metal vents are located to the far right and far left of the door. Flanking the bleachers are the pump house (on the southern end) and the former comfort station (on the northern end).

The pump house is clad in Flemish bond brick and has a stepped blue stone base and cast stone coping. Below the coping, brick has been laid in an upside-down triangular pattern and just above the doors and windows there is a course of soldier (header) bricks; historically, black headers in a zigzag pattern ornamented the brick between the triangular pattern and the soldier (header) bricks. The north façade of the pump house has non-historic metal double doors (historically wood) and the east façade has two historic steel windows with metal screens and blue stone sills. The west and south façades historically had two steel windows each (with blue stone sills), but they have now been bricked-in. The structure has a flat roof. Between the pump house and the bleachers on the western perimeter of the pool complex are historic paired metal gates.

The former comfort station (historically known as the "children's comfort station," but now serves as storage space) is clad in Flemish bond brick and has a stepped blue stone base and cast stone coping. The structure is not accessible from the pool deck. Below the coping, brick has been laid in an upside-down

triangular pattern and just above the doors and windows there is a course of soldier (header) bricks; historically, black headers in a zigzag pattern ornamented the brick between the triangular pattern and the soldier (header) bricks. The light yellow-painted south façade of the comfort station has two historic steel windows with metal screens and blue stone sills. The east façade (left unpainted) has two windows boarded up with metal sheets and blue stone sills. Between the windows are two non-historic metal doors. From the pool deck, this façade is obscured from view by an historic short Flemish bond brick wall with cast stone coping and a cast stone base. A concrete walkway between the east façade and the brick wall gives access to the doors; this walkway continues on the north façade as a concrete ramp. The ramp is blocked off from the public by a chain-link gate and fence, which is set on a low Flemish bond brick wall with cast stone coping. The light yellow-painted north façade historically had boys' and girls' wood door entrances that have been bricked-in. Cast stone signs (one reading "BOYS" and the other reading "GIRLS") located at a child's eye level still exist, as does a concrete ramp that once led to the girl's entrance. Now removed, a bronze sign reading "CHILDREN'S / COMFORT STATION" historically hung on the corner of the west and north façades. The light yellow-painted west façade historically had two steel windows with blue stone sills that have been bricked-in. The structure has a flat roof. Between the comfort station and the bleachers on the western perimeter of the pool complex are historic paired metal gates.

The diving pool has been filled-in and is now used as a volleyball court. An historic curved fence that surrounds the former diving pool has historic metal rails and eight historic Flemish bond brick piers capped with cast stone. A lower wall of Flemish bond brick capped with cast stone runs along the perimeter and below the metal rails. The rail and the low brick wall abut the bath house. There is one continuous stone bench that spans the length of the brick wall. In this area, six non-historic lampposts stand equidistant on the deck. On the park side of the historic fence there is a chain-link fence.

The wading pool has had its water drained and there is a non-historic sunburst spray fountain at the center of the pool. One flight of steps runs along the inside perimeter of the pool. A large historic light yellow-painted Flemish bond brick wall (henceforth known as the "dividing wall") with ten piers all capped with cast stone separates the wading pool from the rest of the pool deck. The other side of the dividing wall (facing the large swimming pool) has been left unpainted except for a few locations where it is painted red. A continuous stone bench runs along this side of the wall. Along the curved perimeter of the former wading pool exists a fence that is identical to the one that encloses the diving pool area, except that here the six Flemish bond brick piers with cast stone caps are painted the same light yellow as the dividing brick wall and the low Flemish bond brick wall between the piers and under the rails is painted light yellow on the west side of the north entrance and dark grey on the east side of the north entrance. The metal rails are the same black color as the ones at the diving pool. Two Flemish bond brick piers (that have stacked header bond where the piers curve) flank the entrance to the wading pool, which has no gate. The fence continues parallel to the west side of the dividing brick wall and runs past the brick comfort station to the edge of the playground area (it has historic metal rails and two historic light yellow-painted Flemish bond brick piers with cast stone caps). Between the fence and the brick dividing wall is a concrete ramp where patrons can access the wading pool area (historically, the ramp also provided access to the children's comfort station for those using the wading pool). Along the inside perimeter of the fence are black-painted concrete benches on the west side of the north entrance and a continuous black-painted concrete bench on the east side of the north entrance. Four non-historic lampposts stand equidistant on the deck.

The Surrounding Park including the Playgrounds

The stairway connecting the sidewalk that runs along Seventh Avenue to the pathway in front of the bath house consists of eight granite steps then a landing with asphalt hexagonal-shaped pavers and then another five granite steps. Two non-historic metal railings run from the base to the top of the stairs. On either side of the stairway are large smooth stone retaining walls painted black and these stone retaining walls also exist in rough form along the entire perimeter of the park (a portion of which is part of the landmark site). The pathway directly at the top of the stairs and in front of the rotunda is paved in asphalt hexagonal-shaped pavers. The rest of the pathways in the park are paved with smooth asphalt. A pathway also follows the perimeter of the diving pool and three pathways connect this one to the outer pathway. The rest of the land outside the pool complex and in the landmark site is landscaping consisting of large mature trees, plantings and lawn space. Benches are placed at several locations along the connecting pathways, including three on either side of the east façade of the rotunda. Non-historic lampposts are placed along the pathways. There is a paved

service road that leads to a garage at the northern end of the bath house. Directly behind the concrete bleachers are three historic handball courts, which utilize the back wall of the bleachers. Tall chain-link fencing surrounds the courts. On either side of the courts are mature trees.

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NOTES

¹ Portions of this section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report* (LP-2196) (New York: City of New York, 2006), prepared by Donald Presa; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report* (LP-2232) (New York: City of New York, 2007), prepared by Jennifer Most. Sources for this section include *Atlas of the City of Brooklyn, New York* (E. Robinson, 1886); *Insurance Maps of Brooklyn, New York* (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1926; copyright renewed 1954 and 1977); Clifton Hood, *722 Miles: The Building of the Subways and How They Transformed New York* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Kenneth T. Jackson and John B. Manbeck, *The Neighborhoods of Brooklyn* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); "Pays in Bonds," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 29 December 1891, p. 6; "Sunset Park and Pool," New York City Department of Parks and Recreation website, 7 July 1999, http://nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/historical_signs; NYC Dept. of Parks and Recreation, "WPA Pools" hanging file (located at the Parks Library at the Arsenal, Manhattan, New York); "Swimming Pools," *New York Times*, 2 September 1935, p. 16; "Fifth Avenue Elevated," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 28 February 1889, p. 4; "The New Union Depot," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 June 1890, p. 19; "Will Be Built," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 11 January 1890, p. 6; "The Third Avenue Elevated," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 14 January 1890, p. 6; "Finnish Life in New York," *New York Times*, 4 February 1940, p. 109.

² The Brooklyn United Elevated Railway Company became the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company (BRT) in 1908.

³ "Brooklyn's New Parks," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 7 July 1892, p. 5.

⁴ "Money for Brooklyn Parks," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 17 July 1899, p. 14.

⁵ "Small Parks Get Attention," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 19 October 1902, p. 9.

⁶ The Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company filed for bankruptcy on December 31, 1918 due to inflation and a disastrous elevated train accident that killed ninety-three people. In March 1923, the railway emerged from receivership and was renamed the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation (BMT). The BMT eventually was sold to the City of New York on June 1, 1940 under the authority of Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia who wished to have all subway and elevated train lines municipally owned and operated. See *722 Miles*.

⁷ To commemorate the large Finnish presence that characterized Sunset Park in the first half of the twentieth century, 40th Street was renamed "Finlandia Street" in 1991.

⁸ This section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*.

⁹ 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, p. 323.

¹⁰ By the 1920s, the recreational needs of people were changing with the increase in leisure time afforded by the advent of shorter work weeks, paid vacations, and greater mobility due to inventions such as the car. The addition of active recreation to city parks was in direct keeping with popular theories on the importance of providing the public with outlets for active recreation over passive recreation in these changing times. The Great Depression of the 1930s further amplified such needs.

¹¹ Rodgers, p. 82.

¹² A staff of 1,893 architects, engineers, landscape architects, and technicians was employed at the peak of the work. See Rodgers, p. 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, p. 1; April 20, 1935, p. 4.

¹³ Work is ongoing as to whether Robert Moses did actively discourage minorities from using Parks Department facilities such as the WPA-era swimming pools. Also see: Robert Caro, *Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1974) 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).

¹⁴ 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, pp. 84-85.

¹⁵ This section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*.

¹⁶ Moses, p. 20-21.

¹⁷ See "23 Bathing Pools..." p. 17; Moses "Press Release..." July 23, 1934.

¹⁸ 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).

¹⁹ The Hamilton Fish Play Center bath house, designed by Carrère & Hastings in 1898, was designated a New York City Landmark in 1982. The original 1915 bath house structure at Betsy Head was destroyed by fire shortly after the 1936 opening of the pool, and was rebuilt in 1939.

²⁰ This section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*.

²¹ Thabit, p.39.

²² "25,000 at Opening..." p. N6.

²³ See Caro, and Ballon and Jackson.

²⁴ Caro, p. 514.

²⁵ Ballon and Jackson, p. 81.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Research currently being conducted indicates that the racial composition of pool users may have actually been more complex, and dependent on a variety of factors, including the entrance fee structure, which varied depending on the age of the swimmer as well as the time of day. Also see: Caro...*The Power Broker* and Ballon and Jackson...*Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*.

²⁸ This section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*. Sources for this section include "Municipal Swimming Pool Opens," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 21 July 1936, p. 4; Sunset Play Center, plans and blueprints on file at the Olmsted Center, Flushing, New York; "Mayor Opens Pool in Brooklyn Park," *New York Times*, 21 July 1936, p. 19; "Crowds at Brooklyn Park," *New York Times*, 22 July 1936, p. 21.

²⁹ Moses encourages his engineers to innovate more efficient heating and filtering plants, and underwater lighting that were revolutionary developments in pool technology. Caro, p. 456.

³⁰ Caro, p. 456.

³¹ “Mayor Opens Pool in Brooklyn Park,” *New York Times*, 21 July 1936, p. 19.

³² “Municipal Swimming Pool Opens.”

³³ This section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*.

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ Portions of this section adapted from LPC, *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report*; LPC, *Crotona Play Center Designation Report*.

³⁶ New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, 1986.

³⁷ Moses, p. 20-21.

³⁸ Ballon and Jackson, p. 143-144.

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 Sunset Play Center has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Sunset Play Center is one of a group of eleven immense outdoor swimming pools which were opened in the summer of 1936 by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Parks Commissioner Robert Moses; that it was constructed with funding provided by the Works Progress Administration; that the play center officially opened on July 20, 1936 and became the sixth WPA pool to open throughout New York City and the first to open in Brooklyn; that it was built to accommodate 4,850 swimmers; that, designed by Herbert Magoon, the play center is set within the 24.5-acre site of Sunset Park, located in the neighborhood of the same name and developed as a park at the turn of the twentieth century; that, displacing a small lake, play areas and pathways, construction of the play center resulted in a major redesign of the eastern half of the park in order to accommodate the immense new swimming, diving and wading pools complex, bath house, linking pathways, and adjacent play areas; that the earlier attractive battered masonry wall, which forms the perimeter of the entire park, was breached on the Seventh Avenue side to accommodate a monumental flight of steps leading up to the play center's main entrance; that the design of the bath house entrance is one of the most distinctive features of the play center with its giant corner piers that frame the one-and-a-half-story rotunda and that the unusual shape, with its stacked cylindrical brick walls, hints at the remarkable lobby awaiting bathers inside; that the standard play center building materials are used here in a particularly distinctive way in that decorative bonds and patterning of brick appear at a number of locations, while cast stone diamond shapes and bricks placed in a chevron pattern form a 1930s interpretation of a classical entablature above the grand entranceway and across the entire building; that the alternating brick piers and black-painted windows (that once were matched by black-painted bricks below) give the impression of a colonnade, which is particularly evident when the stacked dogtooth brick piers are lit by the sun; that the original and creative use made of modest materials and forms, and the careful siting of the facility, make it a distinguished, individual design; and that the complex, along with the other WPA-era pools, was a major accomplishment of engineering and architecture, and is recognized as being among the most remarkable public recreational facilities ever constructed in the United States.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Sunset Play Center, Seventh Avenue between 41st Street and 44th Street, Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 921, Lot 1, and portions of the adjacent public way, consisting of the property bounded by a line extending northerly from the intersection of the western curblineline of Seventh Avenue and the northern curblineline of 44th Street along the western curblineline of Seventh Avenue to the southern curblineline of 41st Street, westerly along the southern curblineline of 41st Street approximately 515 feet to a point on the southern curblineline of 41st Street which intersects with a line extending northerly from the china link fence located approximately 45 feet to the west of the western wall of the Sunset Play Center, continuing southerly along that line and along the chain link fence approximately 570 feet, then westerly approximately 15 feet along a line extending from the chain link fence which runs along the southern side of a playground located west of the western wall of the Sunset Play Center to its intersecting point with the western curblineline of the paved pedestrian path, then following the curvature of the western curblineline of the paved pedestrian path around to the west and extending the line of the curb to a point which intersects with the western curblineline of the paved allee aligned with Sixth Avenue, southerly along the western curblineline of the paved allee to the northern curblineline of 44th Street, and easterly along the northern curblineline of 44th Street 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, Christopher Moore, Elizabeth Ryan, Roberta Washington,
Commissioners



Sunset Play Center

Seventh Avenue between 41st Street and 44th Street, Sunset Park, Brooklyn

Bath house rotunda (east façade)

Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

East façade of bath house and stairway connecting Seventh Avenue sidewalk to the park

Photo: Amanda Davis



Sunset Play Center

Left: Bath house (east façade), narrow wall just south of rotunda Right: Bath house (east façade), narrow wall just north of rotunda
Photos: Amanda Davis



Sunset Play Center

North wing of bath house (view of east and north façades)

Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

North façade of bath house; maintenance garage at basement level

Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Brick wall connected to bath house and separating pool complex from former wading pool

Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

South wing of bath house (east and south façades)

Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center
 South façade of bath house
 Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center
 Chain-link fence enclosing former diving pool area; south façade of bath house (right side of photo)
 Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Detail of window bays, stacked dogtooth brick piers and English common bond (below windows)
 Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Detail of steel bottom-sash pivot windows with stacked header bond below (south façade)
 Photo: Amanda Davis



Sunset Play Center

West façade of bath house and swimming pool with two island filters

Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center
Bath house rotunda (west façade); swimming pool in foreground
Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

North wing of bath house (west façade), location of women's locker room

Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Entrance to women's showers (northernmost end of west façade)
Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

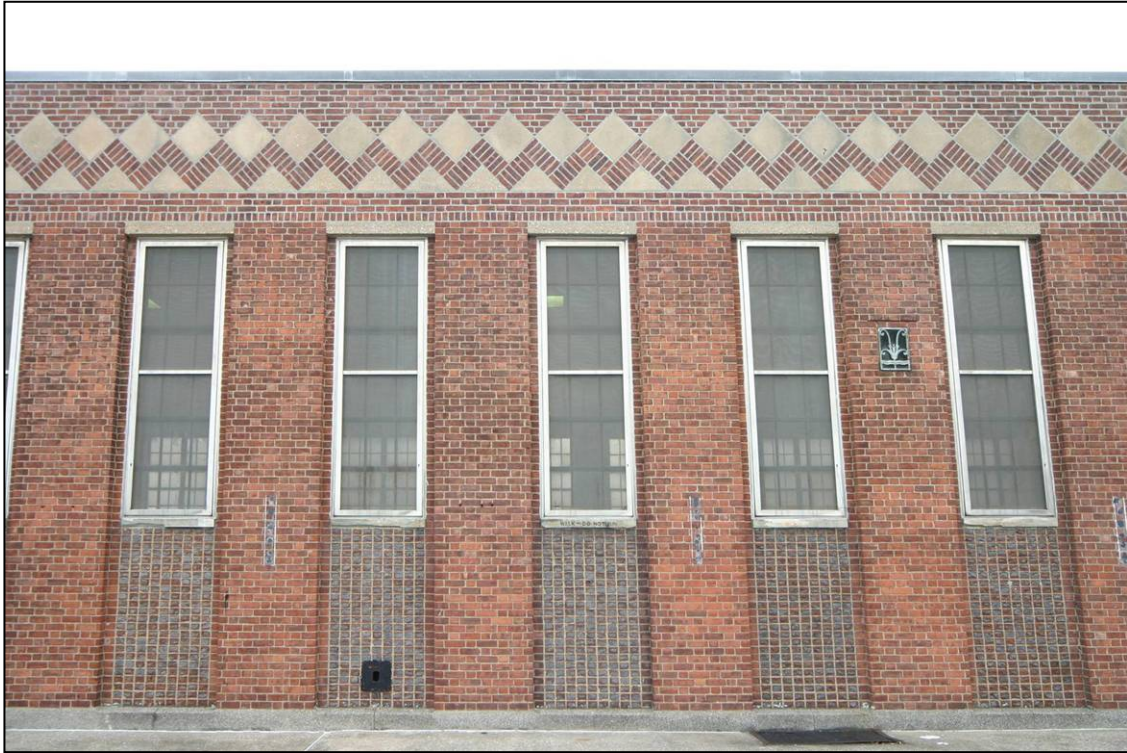
Entrance to women's locker room behind footbath wall (central wing of west façade)
Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

South wing of bath house (west façade), location of men's locker room

Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Detail of west façade window bays and decorative bronze grille (right side of photo)

Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Entrances to men's locker room and showers (southernmost end of west façade)

Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

View of swimming pool (looking north); filled-in diving pool in foreground
Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Concrete and brick bleachers on western perimeter of pool complex
Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Pump house (east and north façades), located south of bleachers
Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Former children's comfort station (now storage space; south and east façades), located north of bleachers
Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Former diving pool (now volleyball court), located south of swimming pool
Photo: Carl Forster



Sunset Play Center

Brick wall separating former wading pool from rest of pool complex
Photo: Carl Forster



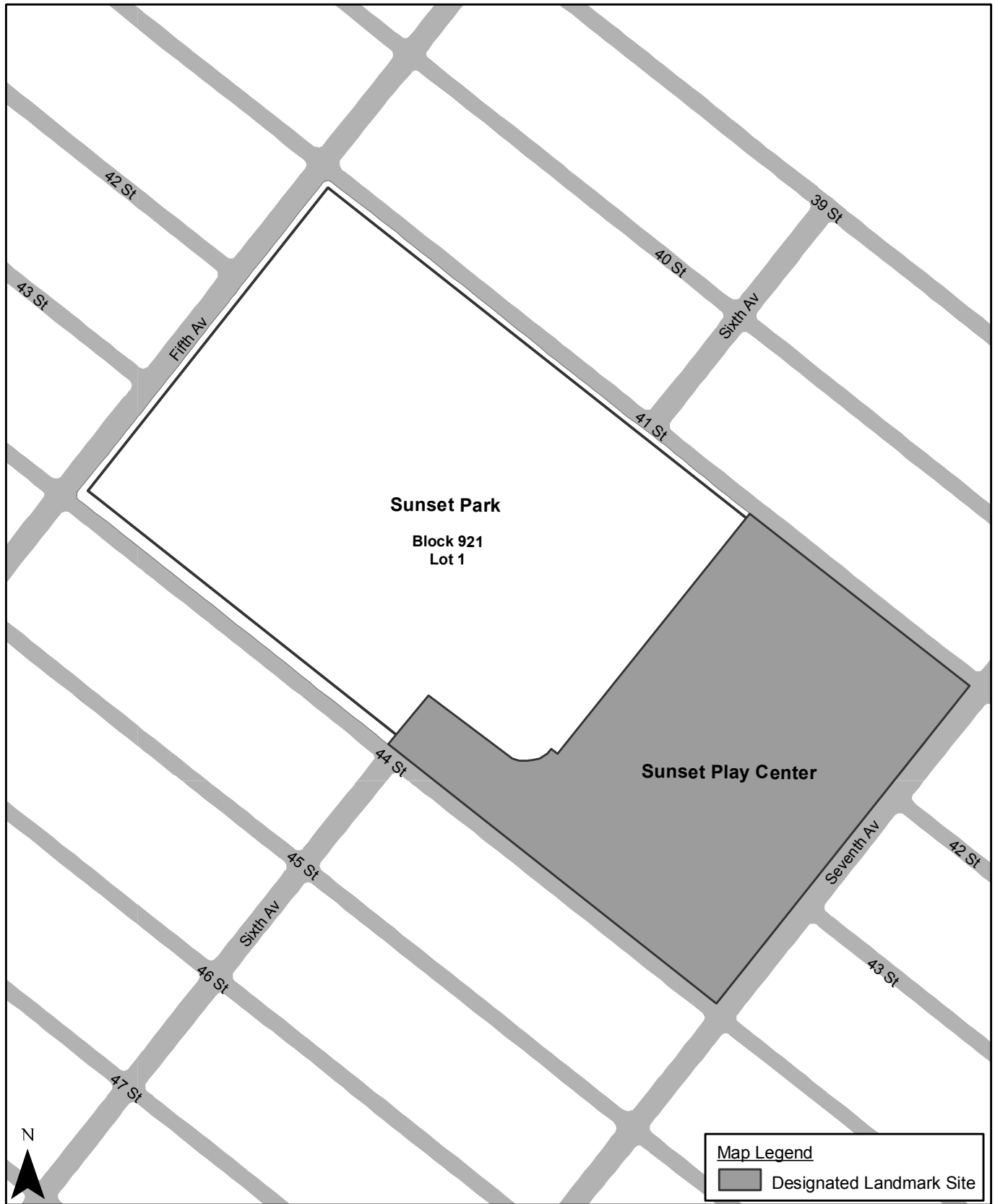
Sunset Play Center

Former wading pool (now water sprays from central fountain), located north of pool complex
Photo: Amanda Davis



Sunset Play Center

Former wading pool (view looking east)
Photo: Amanda Davis



SUNSET PLAY CENTER (LP-2242),
Seventh Avenue between 41st Street and 44th Street.
Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 921, Lot 1
(in part and portions of the adjacent public way).

Designated: July 24, 2007

Graphic Source: New York City Department of City Planning, MapPLUTO, Edition 03C, December 2003.
Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, J.M.