

Jackie Robinson (Colonial Park) Play Center Bath House Interior

Interior Landmark

319 West 145th Street

Designation Date: April 10, 2007



Jackie Robinson (Colonial Park) Play Center Bath House Interior: View Looking Northeast with Ticket Booth, Borough of Manhattan

Photo: Jennifer Most, 2007

The Jackie Robinson Play Center is one of a group of 11 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 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 11 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. 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 was comprised largely of staff members and consultants who had earlier worked for Moses at other governmental agencies, including architect Aymar Embury II, landscape architects Gilmore D. Clarke and Allyn R. Jennings, and civil engineers W. Earle Andrews and William H. Latham. Surviving documents also indicate that Moses, himself a long-time swimming enthusiast, gave detailed attention to the designs for the new pool complexes.

The Jackie Robinson Play Center was the only one of the WPA-era pools sited in a predominantly minority neighborhood. Formally opened on August 8, 1936, the Play Center was built on a narrow hillside site acquired by the City of New York and developed as Colonial Park soon after the turn of the 20th century. The uniquely monumental two-story design of the Play Center bath house exterior is matched in its grandeur by the cathedral-like vaulted interior lobby. Several Gothic arches spring from four exposed brick columns towards the center of the lobby, resulting in soaring vaults of various magnitudes. The rear vaults are centered above two cascading stairways that lead in opposite directions to the men's and women's locker rooms.

Along the north and south walls of the space, two recessed doorways, capped by segmental brick relieving arches and featuring rounded brick reveals, are found beneath pointed Gothic arches projecting from the wall only the thickness of a single brick course. The ticket booth, vaguely reminiscent of the prow of a ship, projects seamlessly from a full height attached buttress located between the two main doors to the Play Center lobby, and features sixteen multi-paned windows and a polished stone countertop. Exposed brick walls featuring bas-relief panels of water-related activities, floral limestone corbels supporting the concrete Gothic arches, and an original flagged bluestone floor, further characterize this space.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)