

Jackie Robinson (Colonial Park) Play Center

Individual Landmark

319 West 145th Street

Designation Date: April 10, 2007



Jackie Robinson (Colonial Park) Play Center: East (Front) Facade, Looking Southwest from Bradhurst Avenue, Borough of Manhattan

Photo: Daniel Avila, 2006

The Jackie Robinson 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. 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 Center's bath house is an ingenious response to the topography of the park. A rocky cliff drops off sharply from Edgecombe Avenue to the west, and the terrain then continues in a gentler downward slope to level ground along Bradhurst Avenue to the east. The locker rooms are located on the upper floor in order to provide direct access to the swimming and diving pools located above the grade of Bradhurst Avenue. The unusual dimensions of the swimming pool (82' x 236') and the oddly shaped diving pool are accommodations to the narrowness of the site and the presence of the stone cliffs.

The fortress-like design of the Bradhurst Avenue elevation of the bath house capitalizes on its two-story height. Recessed bays which employ both rounded and slightly pointed arches are demarcated by giant rounded attached buttresses. Large round towers rise above the roof line at the ends of the building and flank the entrance. Rounded and curvilinear forms also characterize the design of the bandshell terrace to the north of the pool complex, as well as its perimeter walls and the elevated pathway continuing northward from the terrace, all which date to the same time period. The wading pool complex located between 152nd and 153rd Streets also includes an attractive and contemporary comfort station which repeats the curvilinear forms employed elsewhere.

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