

## Thomas Jefferson Play Center

Individual Landmark

First Avenue between East 111th and 114th Streets

Designation Date: July 24, 2007



**Thomas Jefferson Play Center: Main Entrance, First Avenue (view north east)**

First Avenue between East 111<sup>th</sup> Street and East 114<sup>th</sup> Street, Borough of Manhattan

Photo: Carl Forster

The Thomas Jefferson 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 Parks 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 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. Each had separate swimming, diving, and wading pools, and a large bath house with locker

room sections that 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.

The second of the new swimming pools to be completed, the Thomas Jefferson Play Center, was opened on June 27, 1936. Designed by Stanley Brogren and constructed of brick and cast concrete, its U-shaped bath house frames the diving pool which is located just east of the entry courtyard. Beyond lies the swimming pool, which at 100 feet x 246 feet, is among the smaller of the 11, and is bordered on three sides by a slightly elevated terrace. The tall curb topped by fencing, located at the outer edge of the terrace, defines the perimeter of the pool complex. The horizontality of the bath house is emphasized by the parapet coping and string courses of cast-concrete, and by the band of windows which is carried around on all elevations. As in the designs for the other pool complexes, the decorative potential of brick is a notable feature at the Thomas Jefferson Play Center, as seen, for example, in the raised geometric swags placed above the window bands and in the interplay established between convex and concave forms at the corners of the First Avenue façade. The pool is further enhanced by the broad allees which extend along the northern and southern perimeters of the pool complex.

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