

**CROTONA PLAY CENTER BATH HOUSE INTERIOR**, main floor interior consisting of the north and south locker rooms, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, ceiling surfaces, ceiling buttressing, and doorways. Fulton Avenue between East 172<sup>nd</sup> Street and East 173<sup>rd</sup> Street, Borough of The Bronx.

Constructed 1934-1936; Herbert Magoon and others, Architects; Aymar Embury II, Consulting Architect; Gilmore D. Clarke and others, Landscape Architects.

Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 2941, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On January 30, 2007, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Crotona Play Center (LP-2233) including the main floor interior consisting of the north and south locker rooms, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, ceiling surfaces, ceiling buttressing, and doorways, Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Twelve witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, and representatives from the Municipal Art Society of New York, the Historic Districts Council, the Society for the Architecture of the City, the Preservation League of Staten Island, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, and the Modern Architecture Working Group. The Commission has also received letters from the Fine Arts Federation of New York and Carnegie Hill Neighbors, Inc., in support of designation. Several of the speakers 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-1777).

### Summary

The Crotona 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 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 eleven facilities shared many of the same basic components. The complexes generally employed low-cost building materials, principally brick and cast stone, 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 seventh of the complexes to open, the Crotona Play Center was the only one of the WPA-era pools sited in the Borough of the Bronx. Set amidst the rock outcroppings characteristic of Crotona Park, the Crotona Play Center is considered one of the great WPA Art Moderne structures of the Depression era in New York. The main entrance, a towered monumental arched gateway composed of robust geometric forms, is reached from Fulton Avenue. Upon ascending the main entrance stairway and proceeding through the open-air courtyard, patrons of the Play Center would then be led through one of two gauged brick archways on either side of the ticket booth, to the men's and women's locker rooms. Unlike those in the other play centers, the men's and women's locker rooms of the Crotona Play Center bath house interior are arranged as adjoining mirror-image spaces. Each is dramatically articulated by a series of arched buttresses which, springing from low lateral supports, span the entire width of the space. Arched clerestory windows and glazed terra-cotta tiling further characterize each of the voluminous double-height spaces.

## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### History of the Crotona Play Center Site<sup>1</sup>

The drive to acquire new parkland for the citizens of the City of New York began with Frederick Law Olmsted, who was the chief of the New York City Parks Department's Bureau of Design and Superintendence in the 1870s. His vision for developing the Bronx included a system of parks and parkways that would feature roads following the existing topography rather than a rigid grid system as in Manhattan. City officials rejected his recommendations and dismissed him in 1877. However, his ideas were not forgotten. John Mullaly, editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, rallied public enthusiasm for the plan. In 1881, the New York Park Association was formed. It was made up of many of the city's leading businessmen and professionals, such as Charles L. Tiffany, Gustav Schwab, Jordan L. Mott, Egbert L. Viele, and H. B. Claflin. They proposed creating new public parkland by preserving large tracts of open land in rural areas that were newly annexed or soon-to-be-annexed to the city. The Association was unsuccessful, however, in persuading the Mayor and the Board of Aldermen to authorize a commission to oversee the selection of new parkland, so they took their case to the New York State Legislature. Despite much political opposition, the Legislature created the Park Commission in 1883. It proposed three large parks: Pelham Bay, Bronx, and Van Cortlandt, as well as three smaller parks: Crotona, Claremont, and Saint Mary's.<sup>2</sup>

The Crotona Play Center is located along the western boundary of 151 acres of picturesque parkland in the southeast Bronx known as Crotona Park. The majority of the land for the park (135.36 acres) was acquired by the City of New York in 1888, around the same time it acquired 4,000 acres of land for eight other parks and parkways in the Bronx, including Van Cortlandt Park, and the Bronx and Pelham Parkways. The acquisition of parkland during this time was part of a larger nation-wide reform effort to increase the availability of organized play areas in inner cities. Although the city had originally planned to name the park "Bathgate Park" after the family that had long owned the land, a dispute with the Bathgate family led the Parks Department to name the park instead after Croton, an ancient Greek colony famed for its Olympic athletes and also the name of the old New York City aqueduct.

At the time of its acquisition, the area comprising Crotona Park was already famous for its views, trees, and its pond. The site was considered the "eastern crown" of the area, and offered a breathtaking range of views, from the Palisades of New Jersey to the west, to the towers of the Brooklyn Bridge to the south. In a report to the New York State Legislature by the commission selected to locate lands for public parks in the Bronx, it was noted that the Crotona Park lands already had the "indispensable requisites for a park," including "beauty and variety of surface." The committee commended the site for its "luxuriant growth of forest" which provided ample shade even on a "hot summer noon," and commented on the beauty of the "interlacing branches" of the native oak, elm, and magnolia trees, which gave "an impression of solitude and isolation totally at variance with the idea of proximity to a great commercial center [i.e. Manhattan]." The Crotona Park site was also considered a choice location due to its accessibility by means of the Harlem Railroad, the Elevated Railroads, as well as by horse cars. The committee also noted that projected routes of the Suburban Rapid Transit Company along the eastern and western boundaries of the park would ensure that setting aside these grounds as parkland "would not offer any impediment to the growth of the city."

Few improvements were made to Crotona Park before the turn of the century. In the early 1900s, the Parks Department paved the perimeter of the pond and installed a wooden warming hut and concession stand for ice skating purposes. Around this same time, parts of the park were drained and flowering shrubs planted. A new grandstand was also built, to be used for ball games and musical concerts. In 1909, an attempt by the New York State Legislature to locate an arsenal for the National Guard within the park was challenged by local residents and ultimately vetoed by New York City Mayor George B. McClellan Jr. Any such seizure of parkland was considered an unacceptable encroachment on city parks, with the incident declared in the *New York Times* as reinforcement of "the need for continual alertness to preserve the parks." Additional parkland was acquired by the city to complete Crotona Park in 1907 and 1911.

By the 1930s, Crotona Park had begun to decline. In 1934, the *New York Daily Star* reported that the park was suffering from "the deprivations (sic) of the surrounding population," "a wasteland of destroyed land, trampled shrubbery, dying trees, and devastated (sic) erosion." Under the auspices of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and his legendary Parks Commissioner, Robert Moses, major changes to Crotona Park were made during the Depression years, including what the *New York Times* referred to in 1938 as a "full-fledged face-

lifting” that took advantage of available Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds. By 1941, Moses had installed numerous new features in the park, including a boathouse on the east side of the pond, five baseball diamonds, 20 tennis courts, 26 handball courts, nine playgrounds, four comfort stations, various picnic and sitting areas, and, of course, the Crotona Play Center complex. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Crotona Park remains the largest recreation area in the southeast Bronx, and the sixth largest park in the borough.

### Fiorello LaGuardia, Robert Moses and the New Deal<sup>3</sup>

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,<sup>4</sup> 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 Parks 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 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 playgrounds, 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 Parks 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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 60 people, an architecture unit made up of 60 architects and draftsmen, and an engineering unit of about 50. 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 constructing the Triborough Bridge approach road, Moses had his men demolish the terminal while the boat was on the other side of the river. He feuded with President Franklin D. Roosevelt for years, even while Washington was pouring millions of dollars into Moses' own 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> Among them was the Crotona Play Center in the Bronx.

### History of Swimming in New York City<sup>10</sup>

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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 house.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> All of the pools featured new bath houses, with the exception of Hamilton Fish and Betsy Head.<sup>14</sup> 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 City<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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 was well known to have been insensitive to people of color. This attitude towards minorities probably had an impact on the both the siting and administration of the WPA-era pools.<sup>17</sup> 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 (Jackie Robinson) Play Center, at which the mayor offered the facility as proof that his administration was in fact “building and doing things for Harlem.”<sup>18</sup> 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 Play Center, 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.

It has also 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 novel, *The Power Broker*, Robert Caro writes “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.”<sup>19</sup> 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.”<sup>20</sup> Such claims are supported by photographs and video footage from the era, showing that, largely, white and black New Yorkers swam in different pools.<sup>21</sup> 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.

### The Design and Construction of the Crotona Play Center<sup>22</sup>

The Crotona 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 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 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.<sup>23</sup> 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. There had to be underwater lighting for night swimming, 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. 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 stipulations 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. By the summer of 1935, a rectangular wading pool to the north of the Crotona Play Center bath house, measuring 110 feet by 110 feet, had already opened to the public. Plans for the brick bath house

structure, with its monumental entrance gateway along Fulton Avenue and its accommodations for 4,265 bathers, were filed in August 1935, noting an estimated cost of \$563,000. Plans for the one-story filter house were also filed at that time, noting an estimated cost of \$230,000.

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.<sup>24</sup> 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 Crotona Play Center opened on July 24, 1936, the seventh of the WPA-pools to open that summer, and the only one of the pools that was sited in the Bronx.<sup>25</sup> The main swimming pool measured 330 feet long by 125 feet wide, and required, by some accounts, more than a million gallons to fill.

Five-thousand people attended the Friday evening opening of the Crotona Play Center. The *New York Times* reported that an additional 10,000 hopeful entrants had to be turned away.<sup>26</sup> At one point during the evening, Bronx Borough President James Lyons jokingly suggested a race between himself, the Mayor, and Moses, making an indirect reference to the incident which had occurred earlier in the week, during which the Mayor ordered Moses be restrained by police from demolishing a municipal ferry terminal. Lyons was quoted as having said:

“...In such a race, we would have to remember that the Parks Commissioner is something of a speed demon. At times it even takes the Police Department to stop him from speeding ahead with what he considers his civic duty...”<sup>27</sup>

Since its opening, the completed Crotona Play Center has been considered one of the great WPA Art Moderne structures of the Depression era in New York. Featuring compulsory footbaths and one of the most advanced water filtrations systems of its time, the Crotona Play Center was also considered the pinnacle of technological modernity. The monumental two-towered geometric design of the main entrance, set high above the street level, has a striking presence on Fulton Avenue, while the open-air entrance courtyard, lined with its whimsical brick railings repeating the half-circle patterning employed elsewhere on the facade, grants the swimming complex a true sense of place. The repeated motifs of arched bays flanked by box-like pavilions on the facades of the Play Center bath house and filter house help create a cohesive unit from the disparate elements comprising the landmark site. Together with the other WPA-era park improvements, the Crotona Play Center complex was clearly a major achievement of the New Deal in New York City.

#### The Designers Behind the Planning of the Crotona Play Center<sup>28</sup>

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 600 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,<sup>29</sup> 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 Crotona 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 Sunset Park, which opened only four days before the Crotona 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 Crotona Play Center, the majority of the architectural plans and construction drawings on file at Olmsted Center Archives in Queens for the bath house and filter house were prepared by Joseph L. Hautman, while those on file for the pool deck area, including the diving pool and the bleachers, were prepared by Harry Ahrens. 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 Art 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 Worlds 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. Ahrens was born in New York City in 1896, received his degree in architecture from Columbia University in 1916, was "Architect in Chief" with the New York City Parks Department from 1936 until 1941, and a project manager with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill from 1942 until 1946. By 1962, it appears as though Ahrens had relocated to Philadelphia. William H. Latham is noted as the supervising engineer on many of the drawings for the bath house, filter house, and pool deck areas, while an assortment of other names appear on the drawings as well.

Gilmore D. Clarke, to an unknown degree, was directly involved with the landscape design of the Crotona Play Center, as well as the areas of Crotona Park that surround the complex. While the signature of one A.H. Funnell is found on many of the landscaping drawings, they do often bear Clarke's signature of approval. 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.

Clarke's 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 Astoria Park, his work for the Parks Department included Bryant Park, Central Park

Zoo, City Hall Park, Orchard Beach in the Bronx, and the Henry Hudson Parkway. He taught landscape architecture at Cornell University from 1935 to 1950, serving as dean from 1939 until his retirement in 1950, and wrote several articles for trade periodicals. In 1935, Clarke joined Michael Rapuano, an engineer and landscape architect, establishing the New York civil engineering and landscape architectural firm Clarke & Rapuano, Inc. Clarke was president of the firm from 1962 until his retirement in 1972. Later in his career, Clarke worked as a consultant on the construction of the United Nations Headquarters in New York and became a Trustee for the American Museum of Natural History.

Frederick G. R. Roth is responsible for the designs of the sculptural elements found throughout the Play Center complex, including the ibis-topped pilasters of the bath house, and the bas-relief roundels located within the seating niches of the pool deck. Roth was born in Brooklyn in 1872 and studied art privately both in Vienna and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin. By the time he completed his studies in 1894, Roth had already begun an active professional career as a sculptor. In 1934, Roth began working as the chief sculptor for the Parks Department through the WPA. In that year, Roth oversaw a team of artisans who carved the limestone reliefs that adorn the animal houses of the new Central Park Zoo. Roth's numerous other commissions can be found throughout the parks and playgrounds of the five boroughs. Roth died in 1944, less than a decade after completion of the Crotona Play Center.

### Subsequent History<sup>30</sup>

The Crotona Play Center officially opened at 8:30 PM on Friday, July 24, 1936, the seventh of the eleven pools to open. A rectangular wading pool located to the north of the bath house was already open at this time, having opened in 1935 as part of Moses' campaign to provide safer bathing options for city residents. Few alterations were made to the Play Center complex in the years immediately following its opening.

In 1960, the Crotona Play Center was the unexpected site of a tragedy when a six-year old boy was found drowned in the main swimming pool. In 1965, already showing signs of its age, the Play Center was slated for reconstructive work as part of a \$6.3 million plan for library, park, and playground projects under the administration of Mayor Robert F. Wagner. In 1966, the swimming pools at Crotona were kept open until midnight, alongside those of Sunset Park, Astoria, Joseph Lyons, and several other pools, offering an escape from a particularly stifling heat wave. During the winter of 1971, a group of vandals stripped the Play Center of thousands of dollars worth of piping, valves, and electrical fixtures, striking the play center at Thomas Jefferson as well - the first such incidents of their kind. Ultimately, it cost the city between \$25,000 and \$70,000 in supplies and took nearly 40 men working daily to repair the pool. All of the bath house and filter house windows were filled in at this time to lessen the likelihood of a repeat incident. For the Parks Department, however, reopening the pool remained a priority, as decades after its initial opening, with New York's boundary waters and oceans more polluted than ever, people continued to rely on the urban oasis for relief from the summer's heat.

By the late 1970s, many of the WPA-era pools, Crotona included, had become badly run down, partially the result of the fiscal crisis of the 1970s which hit the Parks Department particularly hard, and which affected the neighborhood surrounding Crotona Park as well. In 1977, the Parks Department began a capital restoration project to restore the pools. The 1978 Parks Department capital budget, however, was a mere \$6.7 million, and by March 1981, the department's 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 conditions of many of its facilities.

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. Moreover, Crotona Park had acquired a reputation of being a dangerous place frequented by drug addicts. In 1982, the Parks Department capital reconstruction program swelled, allowing for one of the largest capital expenditures since the days when Moses was Parks Commissioner. By the fiscal year's end in 1982, the Parks Department had spent \$76 million on projects that included the sprucing up of neighborhood parks, playgrounds, and ball fields, a \$1.3 million rehabilitation of Belvedere Castle in Central Park, renovation of the Coney Island Boardwalk, and the rebuilding of the sea wall along the Shore Parkway in Brooklyn. More than \$100 million in additional capital improvements was expected for the 1983 fiscal year, which would be used

for the rehabilitation of the Crotona Play Center, among other city pools. The Crotona Play Center was closed throughout the summers of 1982 and 1983 while the restoration efforts were underway.

The newly renovated Crotona Play Center was re-opened on August 2, 1984, to the great relief of neighborhood residents. The \$6 million restoration, which included improvements to Crotona Park as well, restored the pool complex to its original appearance. The numerous improvements included the replacement in kind or with appropriate substitution materials of deteriorated or missing architectural elements, the installation of a new roof, windows, electrical systems, lockers, showers, water fountains, a new wrought iron fence around the perimeter of the pool, and a new automatic filtration system. All of the Play Center facilities, including the entrance, pool ramp, toilets, and locker facilities, were made handicap accessible. Graffiti was also removed from both the interior and the exterior of the building, while all surfaces were newly painted, and the artwork surrounding the pool cleaned up. The existing ticket window was removed and a new booth constructed along the south wall of the entrance courtyard. During the rededication ceremony, Mayor Edward I. Koch declared, "...so extensive has the restoration been that we can say this is a brand-new facility;" Koch also cited the pool as an example of what people meant when they would say "the Bronx is coming back," before shedding his clothes to reveal a pair of swimming trunks, and joining nearly 200 children for an inaugural swim.<sup>31</sup>

Financial troubles continued to plague the Parks Department, and 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. In 1993, a 17-year old boy was arrested for molesting a 14 year-old girl at the Crotona pool. Several similar 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.

Significant subsequent changes to the Crotona Play Center bath house interior include the replacement of the bath house's original casement windows, the introduction of additional doors and doorways, the shortening of window openings to accommodate the doorways of the south wall of the women's locker room and the north wall of the men's locker room, and the painting of surfaces including the undersides of the arched buttresses and the floors.

### The Architecture and Site of the Crotona Play Center

The New Deal construction projects within New York City, such as the Crotona 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.

Set amidst the rock outcroppings characteristic of Crotona Park, the Crotona Play Center is considered one of the great WPA Art Moderne structures of the Depression era in New York. The main entrance, a towered monumental arched gateway composed of robust geometric forms, is reached from Fulton Avenue by way of an imposing stairway. The entry courtyard features a second-story gallery edged by a decorative brick railing that repeats the half-circle patterning employed for the balconies on the gateway facade. Quarter-round cast-concrete buttresses and arched clerestory windows are notable features of the exterior of the locker room

section of the bath house. Unlike those in the other play centers, the north and south locker rooms of the Crotona Play Center bath house interior are arranged as adjoining mirror-image spaces. Each is dramatically articulated by a series of arched buttresses which, springing from low lateral supports, span the entire width of the space. Arched clerestory windows and glazed terra-cotta tiling further characterize each of the voluminous double-height spaces.

### Description

#### *Plan and Circulation*

The Crotona Play Center is bounded roughly by 174<sup>th</sup> Street to the north, 172<sup>nd</sup> Street to the south, Fulton Avenue to the west, and Crotona Park to the east. Due to the rocky character of Crotona Park and the presence of a naturally hilly landscape, the Play Center complex is located above grade, accessible via the stairs of the main entrance along Fulton Avenue at 173<sup>rd</sup> Street. Both the bath house and pool deck can be accessed through this main entrance. Entry to the bath house is also possible from the pool deck, as well as from the former wading pool area to the north (now Bathgate Playground).

Upon ascending the main entrance stairway and passing beneath the soaring brick archway of the bath house west facade, patrons of the Crotona Play Center will find themselves in an open-air entrance courtyard. Originally, admission tickets to the Play Center complex were purchased at a ticket booth located along the rear (west) wall of the entrance courtyard.<sup>32</sup> Patrons would then be led through one of two gauged brick archways on either side of the ticket booth, to the men's and women's locker rooms. After changing into swimsuits and storing clothes and valuables with clerks in the available basket space, male and female patrons would pass from the mirror-image locker rooms, through the mandatory shower rooms, past the required foot baths, and finally under the ibis-topped archway of the bath house south facade, before arriving on the pool deck.

#### *Locker Rooms*

Unlike the locker rooms of the other WPA-era pool complexes, the men's and women's locker rooms of the Crotona Play Center are arranged as adjoining mirror-image spaces, with the men's locker room situated to the north and the women's locker room to the south. Each of the locker rooms is dramatically articulated by a series of arched buttresses which, springing from low lateral supports, span the width of the space from north to south, and support the flat roof of the bath house structure above. Running from east to west between each of the arched buttresses, five shallow concrete beams help support the roof. Rectangular in plan, the four walls of each of the locker rooms is tiled to a height of 6'-5" with glazed terra-cotta tiles that project from the wall approximately one inch, and which feature rounded edges where they meet the wall.<sup>33</sup> The remaining wall areas are white-painted cement plaster. Each of the locker rooms is divided into seven bays by the six arched buttresses.

At the first-story of the double-height interior space, each of the bays along the south wall of the women's locker room is punctuated by an arched clerestory window opening.<sup>34</sup> Each sill of the clerestory windows is notched into the glazed tile paneling below. The double door entry to the pool deck area from the women's locker room, located beneath the clerestory window of the leftmost (eastern) bay is a later addition.<sup>35</sup> At the second-story of the double-height space, the south wall projects forward several feet into the women's locker room. Similarly subdivided into seven bays by the six arched buttresses, each of the bays of the second story is punctuated by a pair of rectangular clerestory window openings, recessed into the wall above an extremely sloped sill. The two rectangular louvered vents edging the central bay are original to the bath house structure.

The north wall of the women's locker room is also subdivided into seven bays by the arched buttresses, and also features a projecting second story. While the north wall does not have any fenestration at the first story, each of the second-story bays is punctuated by a pair of rectangular clerestory window openings, recessed into the wall above an extremely sloped sill, similar to the second-story windows of the south wall. Along the north wall, the second-story window openings face onto a shallow, recessed channel that runs between the two locker rooms, allowing more light into the space. A counter for checking clothing and valuables originally ran almost the entire length of the north wall, but has since been removed. Unit heaters continue to run overhead along this wall today. Towards the right extent of the north wall, a single doorway leading to the men's locker room is a later addition.

Two openings pierce the east wall of the women's locker room. A projecting brick-framed segmental arch characterizes the larger of the two openings, located to the right of center along the east wall. Originally

unenclosed, this archway has been filled in to accommodate a non-historic, flat arched double door. Two projecting, tiled pilasters flank this doorway, concealing piping to a height of approximately seven feet, but are non-original to the site. Further to the right, a single doorway leading to a storage area does not appear on original plans for the Play Center bath house; the tiles lining the locker room walls, however, do wrap around the door frame, indicating that the plans were either changed previous to construction, or that the tiles may have been re-laid. The louvered vent centered high on the east wall is original to the locker room interior.

The west elevation of the women's locker room features a flat arched niche with rounded reveals, recessed from the wall approximately three inches. Within the niches, a set of double doors leads to the women's shower area. To the left of this doorway, a water fountain sits recessed within a shorter and deeper niche featuring similarly rounded reveals and lined with a lighter colored glazed tile.

The north and south walls of the men's locker room are mirror images of their counterparts within the women's locker room. Unlike the women's locker room, however, the men's locker room did originally feature an entrance beneath the arched clerestory window of the rightmost (eastern) bay of the north facade, leading to the former wading pool area.<sup>36</sup> Both the west and east elevations of the men's locker room are also similar to those of the women's locker room, differing only slightly in the placement of the openings along the walls. Towards the left extent of the east wall of the men's locker room, an additional doorway leads to a flight of service stairs. The glazed tiles lining the locker room walls wrap around this doorframe.

Used as gymnasiums in non-summer months, the floors of each of the locker room interiors have been painted. The floor of the women's locker room is painted for use as a basketball court in a scheme of blue, red, yellow, and white, while the men's locker room is painted for hop-scotch and other youth-oriented games, using similar colors. Two non-historic, freestanding basketball posts are currently located within the women's locker room. The arched buttresses of the women's locker room interior have been painted green along their underside, while the arched buttresses of the men's locker room interior have been painted entirely orange. Non-historic acoustic tiles line the undersides of the projecting second stories of the north and south facades of the women's and men's locker rooms. The same non-historic acoustic tiles line the underside of the flat ceiling, in the spaces between the shallow beams. Non-historic parks signage, lighting, and fire safety equipment have been hung from all of the interior facades. Additional non-historic light fixtures hang from the ceiling. The rows of free-standing metal lockers found throughout the space are removable.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Information in this section is based on the following sources: "Crotona Park Improved." *New York Times*. July 1, 1941, p. 26; "Eleven City Parks to Share WPA Fund." *New York Times*. December 25, 1938, p. 16; Robert Moses. (for the City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation). *26 Years of Progress: 1934-1960*. 1960; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. "Bathgate Playground." Historical Sign, 2001; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. "Crotona Play Center." hanging file (located at the Parks Library at the Arsenal, Manhattan, New York); New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. "Crotona Park." Historical Sign, 2001; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Memorandum from Helen Rhim, Art & Antiquities" dated July 1998; New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Orchard Beach Bath House and Promenade Designation Report (LP-2197)* New York: City of New York, 2006, report prepared by Donald Presa; Report to New York State Legislation of Commission to Select and Locate Lands for Public Parks. c. 1883, pp. 109-111; W.H. Tolman & Charles Hemstreet. *Better New York*. American Institute of Social Service, 1902, pp. 285, 295; "To Save Crotona Park." *New York Times*. April 24, 1909, p. 6; "\_\_\_\_." *New York Daily Star*. July 26, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> This paragraph taken from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Orchard Beach Bath House and Promenade Designation Report (LP-2197)* New York: City of New York, 2006, report prepared by Donald Presa. Information in this section is based on the following sources: Albert Fein, ed. *Landscape into Cityscape*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981, p. 331; Michael Golan. "The Bronx Parks: A Wonder From the Past," *Bronx County Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 12, No.2, 1975, pp. 32-41; Stephen Jenkins. *The Story of the Bronx*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912, p. 315; John McNamara. *History in Asphalt: The Origin of Bronx Street and Place Names*. New York: The Bronx Historical Society, 1978, 1984, p. 197; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. *Pelham Bay Park: Building Orchard Beach*. New York: City of New York,

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1986, p. 6; *Pelham Bay Park: History*. New York: City of New York, 1986, pp. 2, 11-12; Martha Rogers. "The Bronx Park System: A Faded Design," *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 27, No.2 (1983), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> This section adapted from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report (LP-2196)*, New York: City of New York, 2006, researched and written by Donald Presa. Information in this section is based on the following sources: Robert A. Caro. *The Power Broker Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975, pp. 347-369, 372-373; Francis Cormier. "Some New York City Parks and Parkways: Recreational Improvements Made Since 1934," *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 29. April 1939, pp. 124-136; Phoebe Cutler. *The Public Landscape of the New Deal*. Hew Haven: Yale University Press, c.1985, pp. 8-9; LaGuardia Collection (located at the Municipal Archives): miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses and Mayor LaGuardia; Robert Moses. "Parks and Recreation in New York," transcript of the proceedings of the National Recreation Association (1947), pp. 41-50; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Memorandum on 1935 Budget Request for the Department of Parks." typescript dated August 14, 1934, p. 100; "Pattern For Parks," *Architectural Forum*. Vol. 65. December 1936, pp. 499-500; Cleveland Rodgers. *Robert Moses: Builder for Democracy*, 1st ed. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1952, pp. 82-84; Laura Rosen. "Robert Moses and New York: The Early Years," *The Livable City*, Vol. 12, No. 2. December 1988, pp. 2-4; Floyd Taylor. "Moses Keeps Up with His Work and Cuts through Red Tape," *The World Telegram*. January 7, 1938.

<sup>4</sup> More than 10,000 of the city's 29,000 manufacturing firms had shut down, and the unemployment rate skyrocketed to over 30 percent. An estimated 1.6 million people in New York City were receiving public assistance. See Caro, p. 323.

<sup>5</sup> 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 like 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.

<sup>6</sup> Rodgers, p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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: Caro; Hilary 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.

<sup>9</sup> During Moses' first year as Parks Commissioner, the Department spent over \$90 million (\$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.

<sup>10</sup> Information in this section is based on the following sources: "23 Bathing Pools Planned by Moses." *New York Times*. July 23, 1934, p. 17; Ballon and Jackson, pp. 72-85 and 153-154; Ethan Carr. "Park Pools Still Cool at Fifty." Leaflet for New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, Summer 1986; "City Pools: The Cool Facts." *New York Times*. July 30, 1995, p. 31; Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. *The Encyclopedia of New York*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, pp. 87-88; LaGuardia Collection (located at the Municipal Archives): miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses and Mayor LaGuardia, August 26, 1935; Douglas Martin. "A Day in the Water, Floating on Air," *New York Times*. August 15, 1999, p. CY1; Robert Moses (for the City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation). *6 Years of Progress: 1934-1940*. 1940, p. 20-23; Robert Moses (for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation). "Press Release: Public Swimming Facilities in New York City." July 23, 1934; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Crotona Pool." Historical Sign, 2001; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Restoration of New York City's WPA-Era Swimming Pools." 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Moses, p.20-21.

<sup>12</sup> See "23 Bathing Pools..." p. 17; Moses "Press Release..." July 23, 1934.

<sup>13</sup> 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).

<sup>14</sup> The Hamilton Fish Play Center bath house, designed by Carrere & 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.

<sup>15</sup> Information in this section is based on the following sources: "25,000 at Opening of Harlem Pool," *New York Times*. August 9, 1936, p. N6; Ballon and Jackson, pp. 72-85 and 153-154; Caro, pp. 512-514; LaGuardia Collection (located at the Municipal Archives): miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses and Mayor LaGuardia, August 26, 1935; Walter Thabit. *How East New York Became A Ghetto*. New York: New York University Press, 2005, p.39.

<sup>16</sup> Thabit, p.39.

<sup>17</sup> Work is ongoing as to whether Robert Moses actively discouraged minorities from using Parks Department facilities such as the WPA-era swimming pools. Also see: Caro; Ballon and Jackson.

<sup>18</sup> "25,000 at Opening..." p. N6.

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<sup>19</sup> Caro, p. 514.

<sup>20</sup> Ballon and Jackson, p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Ballon and Jackson, p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> This section adapted from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report (LP-2196)*, New York: City of New York, 2006, researched and written by Donald Presa. Information in this section is based on the following sources: Charles T. Abernathy, Acting Administrator. "Final Report of the WPA for the City of New York, 1935-1943." Mar. 2, 1943, p. 158; Caro, pp. 456-457, 512-514; Galen Cranz. *The Politics of Park Design*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982; LaGuardia Collection: miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, and members of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment; W. H. Latham. "Swimming Pool Construction," *American Architect and Architecture*. November 1936, pp. 33-34; Robert Moses (for the City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation). *8 Years of Parks Progress: 1934-1942*. 1942, pp. 23-24; Robert Moses. "Municipal Recreation," *American Architect and Architecture*. November 1936, pp. 21-23 and 28-29; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, "Astoria Pool." 2001; *New York Times*. October 4, 1934, p. 48; September 22, 1935, p. E10; July 3, 1936, p. 1; Sept 27, 1937, p. 23; "Pavilion Astoria Swimming Pool, New York," *Architectural Forum*. August 1937, pp. 127-28; Plans and blueprints on file at the Olmsted Center, Flushing, New York. Additional resources: "5,000 in the Bronx at Pool Opening." *New York Times*. July 25, 1936, p. 30; "Buildings for Crotona Park." *New York Times*. August 4, 1935, p. N4; Robert Moses (for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation). "Press Release: Crotona Swimming Pool." July 23, 1936; Robert Moses (for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation). "Press Release: Public Swimming Facilities in New York City." July 23, 1934; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. "Crotona Play Center and Pool Dedication." Leaflet. August 2, 1984; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. "Park History: Crotona Park Pool." *Daily Plant*. June 29, 1984; "Pattern For Parks," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 65. December 1936, pp. 499-500.

<sup>23</sup> Moses encouraged his engineers to innovate more efficient heating and filtering plants, and underwater lighting that were revolutionary developments in pool technology. See Caro, p. 456.

<sup>24</sup> Caro, p. 456.

<sup>25</sup> While the Crotona Play Center was the only one of the WPA-era pools ultimately sited in the Bronx, Moses' early explorations originally called for a total of three Bronx sites, including a pool at St. Mary's Park (St. Ann's Avenue and East 149th Street) and a pool at Van Cortlandt Park. Moses, "Press Release..." July 23, 1934.

<sup>26</sup> "5,000 in the Bronx ..." p. 30

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> This section adapted from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission *Astoria Park Pool and Play Center Designation Report (LP-2196)*, New York: City of New York, 2006, researched and written by Donald Presa. Information in this section is based on the following sources: Aymar Embury II obituary, *New York Times*, Nov. 15, 1966, p. 47; Aymar Embury II obituary, *Progressive Architecture*, Vol. 48, no. 1. January 1967, pp. 47-48; Francis Cormier. "Some New York City Parks and Parkways: Recreational Improvements Made Since 1934," *Landscape Architecture*, Vol. 29. April 1939, p. 125; "Designing the Moses Era: The Architecture and Engineering of Aymar Embury II," text of the exhibition at the Hofstra Museum of Hofstra University, May 21 to July 21, 1988; "Gilmore D. Clarke," *Who's Who in America*, Vol. 31. Chicago: The A.N. Marquis Co., 1961, p. 547; "Gilmore D. Clarke, Landscape Architect," reprinted from *Architecture and Design*. July 1940; Gilmore D. Clarke obituary, *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 1982, p. B19; John M. Hatton. "Forty Stores," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 88. May 1948, pp. 93-144; LaGuardia Collection: miscellaneous correspondence between Robert Moses and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia; New York City Directories 1915-34; *New York Times*. September 22, 1935, p. E10; August 27, 1937 p. 36; January 16. 1941, p. 39; June 1, 1947, p. R3; July 10, 1947, p. 36; November 20, 1947, p. 53; December 2, 1947, p. 52; Robert A. M. Stern, et al. *New York 1930: Architecture Between the Two World Wars*. New York: Rizzoli International, 1987, p. 305; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920 (10th Assembly District, sheet 2451); James Ward. *Architects in Practice in New York City 1900-1940*. New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1989, pp. 20, 33; \_\_\_\_\_, "Interiors' Principles of Commercial Design," *Interiors*, Vol. 111. July 1943, pp. 31-35; \_\_\_\_\_, "Match Case Factory," *Architectural Forum*, Vol. 83. May 1946, pp.115-117; \_\_\_\_\_, "Mechanical Equipment and Store Design," *Pencil Points*, Vol. 26. August 1944, pp. 72-77; \_\_\_\_\_, "Third Annual Collection of Interiors to Come," *Interiors*, Vol. 102. January 1943, pp. 21-47; \_\_\_\_\_, "Two Famous Firms Go Modern," *Interiors*, Vol. 101. April 1942, pp. 36-41. Additional resources: Caro, p. 224; George S. Koyl, ed. *American Architects Directory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: R.R. Bowker Company, under the sponsorship of the American Institute of Architects, 1962; "Manhattan Always Rebuilding to Supply Modern Needs," *New York Times*. October 7, 1928, p. RE1; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. "African Antelopes: Central Park Zoo." Historical Sign, 2002; Plans and blueprints on file at the Olmsted Center, Flushing, New York.

<sup>29</sup> The WPA-era pools which Embury is said to have supervised the design 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.

<sup>30</sup> Information in this section is based on the following sources: "5 City Pools Extend Closings to Midnight." *New York Times*. July 12, 1960, p. 10; "Boy, 6, Drowns in Bronx." *New York Times*. July 12, 1960, p. 10; Deidre Carmody. "Parks Department to Start Hiring For the First Time Since Fiscal Crisis" *New York Times*, March 15, 1981, p. 50; City of New York, Office of the Mayor, Edward I. Koch. "Press Release" dated August 2, 1984; "City Pools? '99.9 Percent Peaceful," *New York Times*. August 7, 1994, p. CY14; "City to Start Repairing Three of Its Swimming Pools." *New York Times*. June 25, 1982, p. B3; "Donation will Keep 32 Public Pools Open," *New York Times*. May 16, 1991, p. B2; George James. "Police Report Sex Assault of Girl, 14, in

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Bronx Pool.” *New York Times*. July 6, 1993, p. B3; Michel Marriott. “A Menacing Ritual is Called Common in New York Pools,” *New York Times*. July 7, 1993, p. A1; Douglas Martin. “A Day in the Water, Floating on Air,” *New York Times*. August 15, 1999, p. CY1; “Mayor Advances Library Projects.” *New York Times*. April 19, 1965, p. 16; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. “Bathgate Playground.” Historical Sign, 2001; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. “City Will Begin Repairing 3 of It’s Swimming Pools.” *Daily Plant*, June 25, 1982; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. “Memorandum from Jonathan Kuhn, Re: Summary of notes compiled... from Parklands files.” dated July 27, 1989; New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. “The Restoration of New York City’s W.P.A.-Era Swimming Pools.” 1986; New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), miscellaneous correspondence between the LPC and the Department of Parks and Recreation, files of the LPC. April 27, 1982; Patrice O’Shaughnessy. “A Pool Whets Kids’ Interest.” *Daily News*. August 2, 1984; Emanuel Perlmutter. “Vandalism Keeps Some Out of Pools.” *New York Times*. June 22, 1971, p. 37; Sara Rimer. “Pool, and Pride, Return to the South Bronx,” *New York Times*. August 11, 1985, pp. 1 and 35; “Swimming in the City: Abundance of Pools Makes Cooling Off No Problem.” *New York Times*. July 2, 1976, p. 36; “Urban Rangers Join Fight to Rescue Crotona Park.” *New York Times*. July 3, 1983, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> City of New York, Office of the Mayor, “Press Release...” August 2, 1984.

<sup>32</sup> The original ticket booth was replaced in the early 1980s as part of a larger restoration plan for the pool complex. Currently, patrons purchase admission tickets from a kiosk along the right (south) wall of the courtyard.

<sup>33</sup> Two color tiles predominate in the interior of the locker rooms, one lighter and one darker cream-colored tile. Some of the original tiles have been replaced.

<sup>34</sup> The existing casement windows found throughout the landmark site were probably installed in the 1980s, and are not the Play Center’s original windows. While the original windows were also casement windows, the existing windows are not replicas. The majority of the existing windows feature arched, multi-paned, fixed upper sashes and movable lower sashes, while the original windows typically featured movable central sashes. Currently, all of the windows of the landmark site are covered on the exterior by non-historic rectangular mesh screens and arched metal spandrels.

<sup>35</sup> The original arched window opening above the new doorway was shortened to accommodate the doors.

<sup>36</sup> Similar to its counterpart, however, the clerestory window above the doorway was also shortened, to accommodate a modern set of double doors. The original doors were apparently multi-paned glass double doors.



## 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 Crotona Play Center has a special character, 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 Crotona Play Center is one of a group of eleven immense new outdoor swimming pools which were opened in the summer of 1936 by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Parks Commissioner Robert Moses; that it was the only one of the eleven pools sited in the borough of the Bronx; that it was constructed with funding provided by the Works Progress Administration; that the Play Center is considered one of the great WPA Art Moderne structures of the Depression era in New York; that unlike the other WPA-era play centers, the north and south locker rooms are arranged as mirror-image spaces; that each space is dramatically articulated by a series of arched buttresses; that the buttresses span the entire width of the voluminous double-height spaces; that arched clerestory windows and glazed terra-cotta add to the character of the space; 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 Crotona Play Center main floor interior consisting of the north and south locker rooms, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall surfaces, floor surfaces, ceiling surfaces, ceiling buttressing, and doorways, Fulton Avenue between East 172<sup>nd</sup> Street and East 173<sup>rd</sup> Street, Borough of The Bronx, and designates Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 2941, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated as its Landmark Site.

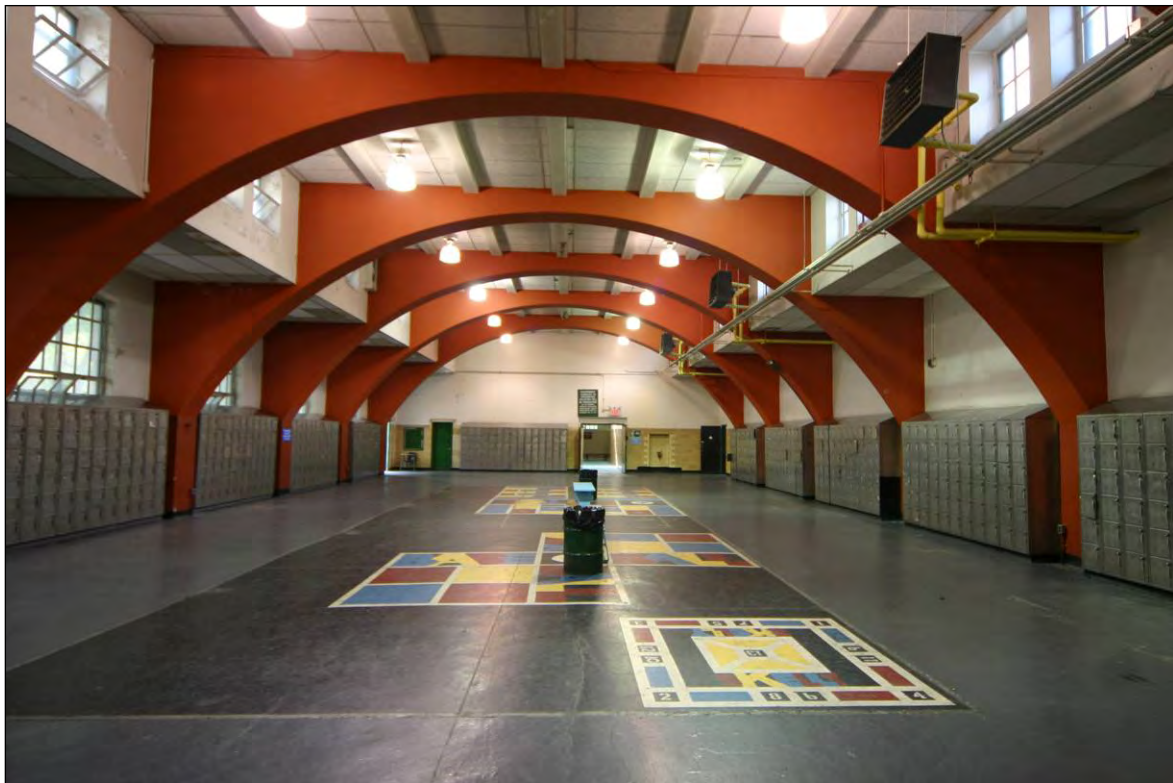
Robert B. Tierney, Chair

Stephen Byrns, Diana Chapin, Joan Gerner, Roberta Brandes Gratz, Christopher Moore, Richard Olcott, Margery Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan, Commissioners



**Crotona Play Center: Men's Locker Room Interior, West Wall, Borough of the Bronx**

*Photo: Carl Forster, 2006*



**Crotona Play Center: Men's Locker Room Interior, East Wall, Borough of the Bronx**

*Photo: Carl Forster, 2006*



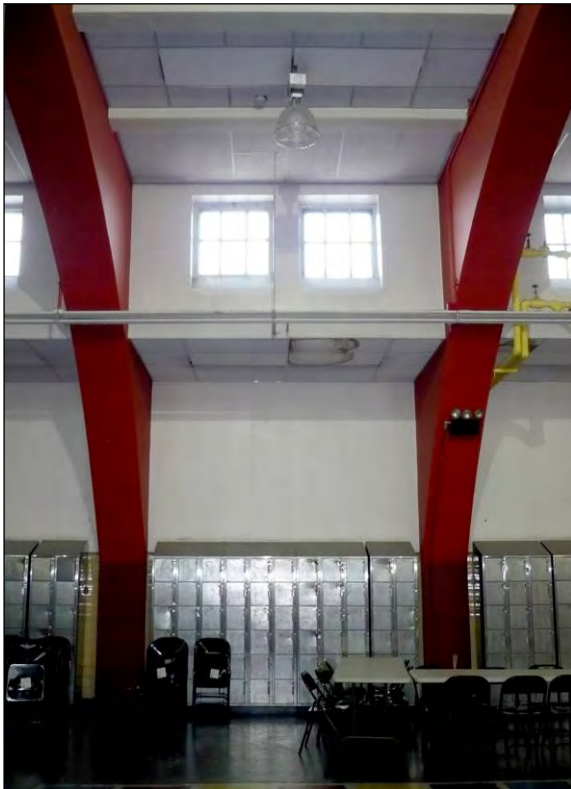
**Crotona Play Center: Men's Locker Room Interior, North Wall (view northeast),  
Borough of the Bronx**

*Photo: Carl Forster, 2006*



**Crotona Play Center: Men's Locker Room Interior, South Wall (view  
southeast), Borough of the Bronx**

*Photo: Carl Forster, 2006*



**Crotona Play Center: Men's Locker Room Interior, South Wall Bay Detail (l); North Wall Door Detail (view northeast) (r), Borough of the Bronx**

*Photos: Jennifer Most, 2007*



**Crotona Play Center: Women's Locker Room Interior, West Wall, Borough of the Bronx**

*Photo: Carl Forster, 2006*



**Crotona Play Center: Women's Locker Room Interior, East Wall, Borough of the Bronx**

*Photo: Carl Forster, 2006*



**Crotona Play Center: Women's Locker Room Interior, South Wall (view southeast), Borough of the Bronx**

*Photo: Carl Forster, 2006*



Crotona Play Center: Women's Locker Room Interior, North Wall (view northeast), *Photo: Carl Forster, 2006*  
Borough of the Bronx



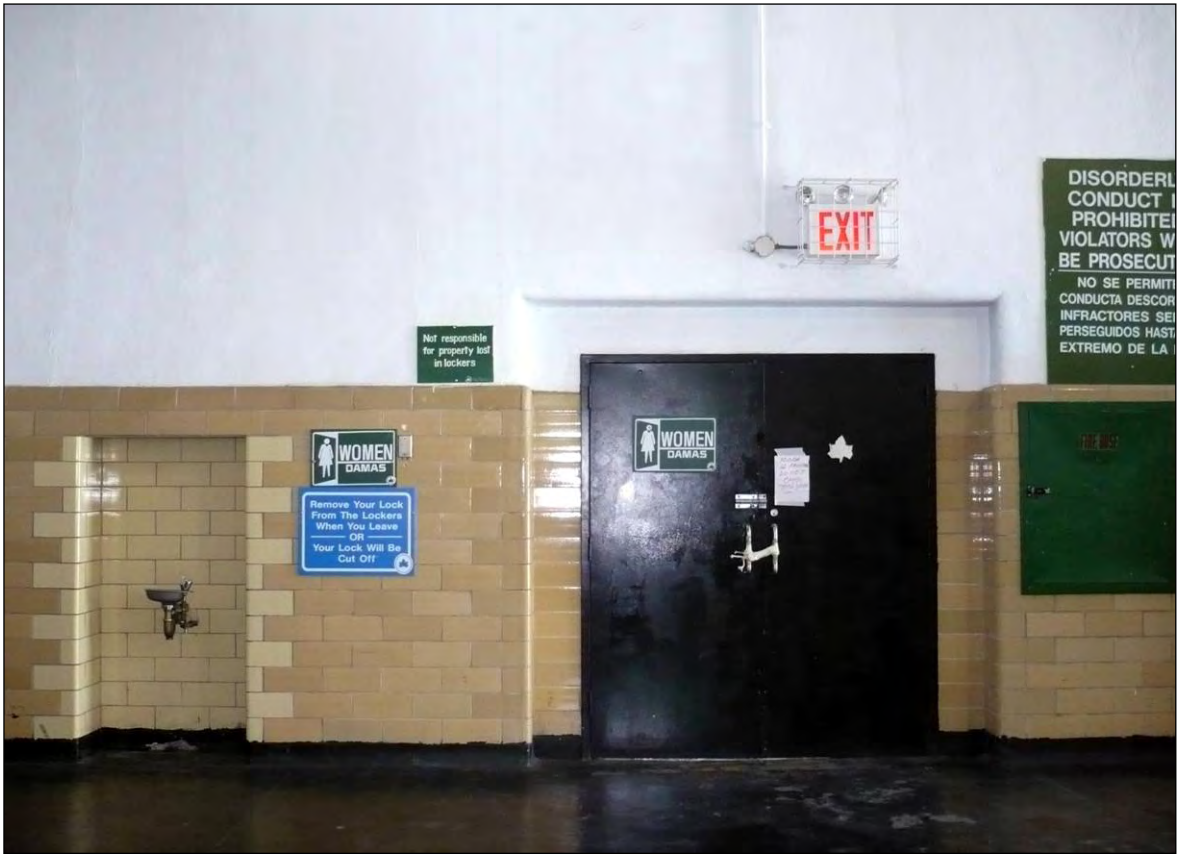
Crotona Play Center: Women's Locker Room Interior, South Wall Bay Detail (l); *Photos: Jennifer Most, 2007*  
Buttress Detail (view northeast) (r), Borough of the Bronx



Crotona Play Center: Women's Locker Room Interior, West Wall (view southwest), *Photo: Jennifer Most, 2007*  
Borough of the Bronx



Crotona Play Center: Women's Locker Room Interior, West Wall Door Openings, *Photo: Jennifer Most, 2007*  
Borough of the Bronx



Crotona Play Center: Women's Locker Room Interior, East Wall Doorway & Water Fountain Niche, Borough of the Bronx

*Photo: Jennifer Most, 2007*

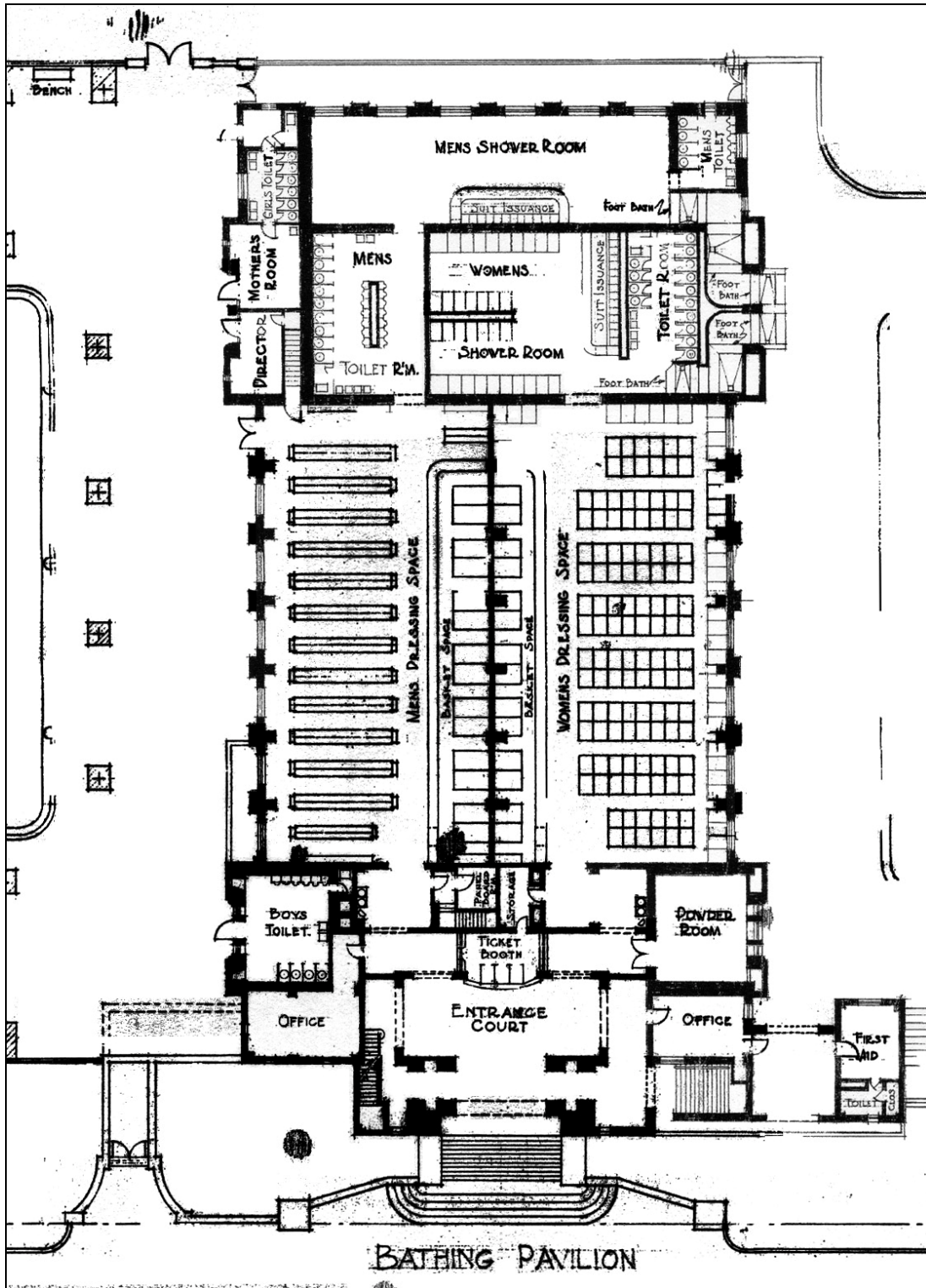


Crotona Play Center: Women's Locker Room Interior, South Wall Doorway Detail (view south) (l); Men's Locker Room Interior, East Wall Doorway Detail (view northeast) (r), Borough of the Bronx



*Photos: Jennifer Most, 2007*



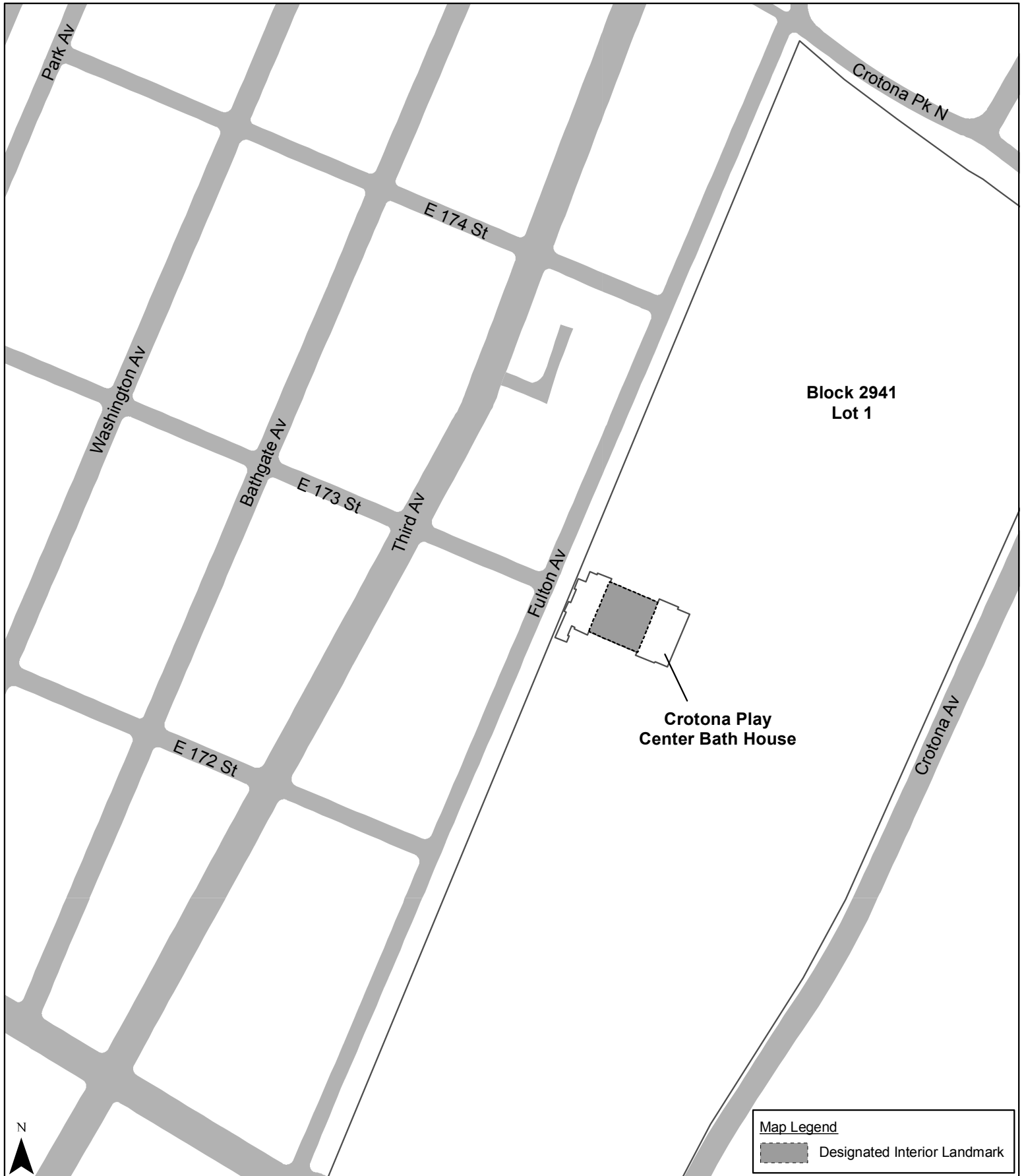


Crotona Play Center Bath House Plan (Portion of Drawing No. X-A-10, 201/251)

Prepared by Joseph L. Hautman

Dated: December 13, 1935

Courtesy of Parks Department Archives, Flushing, Queens



**CROTONA PLAY CENTER BATH HOUSE INTERIOR (LP-2233)**  
 Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx, Tax Map Block 2941, Lot 1 in part,  
 consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

Designated: June 26, 2007