

TESTIMONY OF THE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES ON THE DESIGNATION OF THE CROTONA PLAY CENTER, THE BRONX

September 17, 2007

Good morning Councilmembers. My name is Diane Jackier, Director of External Affairs at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. I am here today to testify on the Commission's designation of the Crotona Play Center in the Bronx as an interior and exterior landmark.

On January 30, 2007, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation. Twelve people spoke in favor including Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, and representatives of the Municipal Arts Society, the Historic Districts Council, the Society for the Architecture of the City, the Preservation League of Staten Island, the Landmarks Conservancy, and the Modern Architecture Working Group. The Commission also received letters in support from the Fine Arts Federation and Carnegie Hill Neighbors. Several of the speakers also expressed support for the larger designation effort of all the WPA-era pools. There were no speakers in opposition. The Commission previously held public hearings on the proposed designation on April 13, 1982, April 3, 1990 and September 11, 1990. On June 26, 2007, the Commission designated the Crotona Play Center both an interior and exterior New York City landmark.

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 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 half years after the LaGuardia administration took office, and all but one survives relatively intact today.

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 motif of each facility. 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.

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 is distinguished by the decorative brickwork of its segmental arch, and by the ibis-topped center post designed by sculptor Frederick G.R. Roth. Both the exterior and interior of the Crotona Play Center survive today as reminders of the impressive WPA structures built in New York City.

The Commission urges you to affirm the designations.