

The North Brooklyn Community News

GREENLINE



photo by Adrian Hernandez

Look at Our Pool Now

After 20 Years the McCarren Pool High and Dry

By Michael Ryan

The cityscape of Athens is defined by the ruins of the Parthenon, allowed to crumble over centuries, then defaced by invaders. The cityscape of Rome has at its core the crumbling remnants of the vandalized Coliseum.

Now, North Brooklyn must decide whether it will be defined by a restoration of a grand, eclectic public monument, or let one of the modern wonders of New York creak under the burden of disuse, crumbling, or worse, bulldozed.

This being New York, however, it may take a while. So far, it's been twenty years of backstabbing, maneuvering, posturing, name calling and no tangible progress yet. It is a powerful lesson in how when strong-willed people not coming to a consensus can quickly destroy the best of intentions.

The great American architect Aymar Embury left dozens of monuments to his talent, from the Triborough Bridge to the campus of Hofstra University. But one of his quirkiest masterpieces was the McCarren Park Pool. When he designed the pool, actually a complex of pools, bathhouses, and an almost imperial archway it helped signal a new awakening in American architecture. "It's very important post-Art Deco architecture," says Roger Lang of the Landmarks Conservancy. "It's landmarkable." In fact, the buildings are listed in the American Institute of Architects Guide to New York.

It took a remarkable confluence of events and people to get the pool built: the Depression; the WPA, a national jobs program; and Robert Moses, the bullheaded developer who thought nothing of tearing down thousand of homes to make way for the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. In one summer, 1936, he opened a new pool in the City every week, ending with the crown jewel: McCarren Park. "It was this amazing combination of the least amount of money and the most accessible talent," says community organizer

OLYMPIC SWAMP: As a result of a history of community infighting the WPA pool in McCarren Park has suffered long neglect. New consensus and a NYC bid for the Olympic Games may benefit the pool that was once referred to by comedian Alan King as "Our Hamptons."

Phyllis Yampolsky, "mosaic and terra cotta and glass tile."

The thousands of kids who turned out on hot, sticky summer days to cool off, meet their friends, and play, probably knew little about architecture and less about the politics; but they knew where they could go when they couldn't get to a beach.

"It was our Hamptons," the late comedian Alan King said of that urban Nirvana.

Today, nine of Moses' ten pools are still in use; and then there's McCarren.

Like all of the original pools, McCarren was closed in 1984 under a grant for renovation. "It was in complete disrepair," former City Council Member Ken Fisher says of the first time he was asked to inspect the pool. Then-Council Member

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Home Improvement Section

Make your own lamp — This Recycled and Found Material Lamp is designed by T. S. Osanai.

Rusted steel support brackets were found washed up on Greenpoint waterfront. Starting on Page 12

The McCarren Pool

Abe Gerges won a \$16 million grant for McCarren alone.

A plan approved by Community Board #1 in 1984 was unable to go anywhere. Critics of the plan caused the NYC Parks Department to back away from the project due to lack of consensus. Elected officials would not advocate for the \$30 million necessary to renovate or rebuild the pool because they feared offending community factions.

Yet, even today, twenty years after it was closed, the pool has undergone just the minimum maintenance required to keep its bathhouse roofs from crashing down. The special grant has long since been absorbed into the general budget. And an old fashioned New York political standoff began.

It just got weirder from there.

A Group called Friends of McCarren Park was formed to help expedite what seemed to be a community consensus. "Jan Peterson, who was the head of this group, told me, 'You've got to talk to this person, and this person, and that person and make sure they do what they're going to do, which is tear down the pool,'" Yampolsky recalls.

But one day Yampolsky, an artist who in the 1970s was an artist-in-residence of NYC Parks, wandered past the pool when an artist gathered a group of local kids and asked them to share their memories of the Pool and talk about what should be done with it.

Moved, Yampolsky looked around. "That's the first time I ever saw the inside space," she says. "It's breathtaking. The expanse of space, you don't see that in the

city. I fell in love with it."

The fireworks began. Yampolsky says that a Community Board official accused her of caring for artists more than children. She says she felt ostracized. When a vote of Friends was taken, several members who Yampolsky thought she had in her corner voted, instead, to raze the Pool. She and some allies broke off to form the Independent Friends of McCarren Park.

"It's a NIMBY thing on the part of some Greenpoint residents," Arthur Steier, who was allied with Yampolsky but has broken with her over tactics, believes. Before 1984, busloads of kid were brought to the pool from Bed-Stuy and adjoining neighborhoods. Local residents grumbled that they dirtied the water and left detritus in the pool.

Whether that was true or just a thin veneer over a structure of racism, the Landscape Conservancy's Roger Lang points out that new generations of powerful filtration devices are now capable of keeping virtually any swimming pool clean.

The City planned to destroy the pool in April of 1989, but Independent Friends discovered a regulation that barred destruction of City Property until a plan was approved to replace it.

But once again, lack of agreement shattered a coalition. Unable to work with Steier, Yampolsky and some allies founded the rival McCarren Park Conservancy. Another layer of politics was added to the mix.

Yampolsky's group, through then-



MEANWHILE ... PARK REPAIRS: On October 1, a groundbreaking ceremony was held marking the start of the reconstruction of the McCarren Park running track and the installation of a new synthetic turf soccer field. Over \$1.5 million was allocated by the Brooklyn Borough President and the City Council, an additional \$62,000 was funded by ING Direct, and \$50,000 procured by Assemblyman Joe Lentol's office. Pictured: (l to r) Brooklyn Borough Pres. Marty Markowitz, Asst. Parks Commissioner Nancy Barthold, Assemblyman Joe Lentol, Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe and distinguished friends.

Council Member Fisher, was introduced to Robert A.M. Stern, the internationally known architect and Dean of the Yale School of Architecture. Stern became so excited by the project that he assigned one of his staff members to draw up some plans based on drawings by Yampolsky, that would include winterizing, cafes, a health club, fountains, activities for seniors and the young, and a complete rehab of existing structures. In the proposed configura-

tions, the giant pool (the size of four Olympic pools) would be shrunk to make room for more earth-bound activities including a sports area for the Williamsburg Project—a group of Latino competition skateboard artists.

More recently, Steier enlisted local architect Leah Kreger, who sat down to do some drawings; she proposed a retractable roof and greenbuilding technology to make the Pool **(Continues on Page Fourteen)**



McCarren Pool

Center which would include three Olympic-sized pools: one competition pool with seating for 15,000 spectators, another for practice and warm-up with no spectator seating, and a diving pool with a 10-meter tower and spectator stands that would accommodate 12,000 people.

“Our dream is to have the pool back in operation,” said Kileta, “but no one has 26 or 36 million dollars it would take.”

Twenty years have passed. No clear plan has been adopted. The funding is not in place, the permissions still lacking. But a possible Olympic bid does offer the possibility of a lucky hand. The announce-

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ment of the chosen city will be known in early July, 2005.

Hope may spring eternal—neighbors are showing signs of feuding less and less. Walk by the McCarren Pool some grey, drizzly afternoon this winter and you will see a building that is, for all appearances, decrepit and useless.

Now imagine that same building, its roof closed, happy kids swimming or working out, neighbors meeting in a café, old people playing checkers, an information booth handing out neighborhood guides and newsletters a shelter from the storm.

It could be.

Imagine. ♪