



New York City  
Department of Parks & Recreation



**Hearing before the City Council**  
**Sub Committee on Landmarks, Public Siting & Martime**

**Landmark Designation of Astoria Pool and Orchard Beach**

**September 7, 2006**

- The WPA era (or Works Progress Administration) buildings and landscapes are an extraordinary inheritance. The Moses era park designers, including Aymar Embury and Gilmore Clarke used basic materials: brick, cast concrete and steel to create fantastic, dramatic public structures, many of which survived to the present day. We refer to this era as the Golden Age of Park Design of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.
- With nearly \$1.4 billion dollars of park investment anticipated over the next four years, we are in the midst of another great era of park design. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being invested in new parks such as Freshkills and the Highline and waterfront development projects are taking place in each of the five boroughs. But as we invest in new parks, it is essential that we preserve the best examples of the preceding generations of park designs. It is for this reason that Commissioner Benepe is pleased to support the designation of two of the greatest examples of the WPA architecture in New York City Parks: Astoria Pool and Orchard Beach.
- We have worked in close partnership with the Landmarks Preservation Commission to prepare the designations reports for these popular and essential parks facilities to ensure that their unique character is preserved for future generations.
- Astoria Pool is perhaps the best and most intact example of the 10 enormous pools that were opened one per week in 1936- an astounding accomplishment even by today's standards. *Fortune* magazine called it "the swimming pool year" in an article on Moses. Astoria hosts hundreds of thousands of users each summer, making it perhaps the largest and most heavily used of Parks 35 outdoor pools. Astoria has a theatrical quality: it looks like a jazz-era set for the musical *Anything Goes*. Perhaps that is why, in the early 1940s, a group of boys in the neighborhood who were devoted swimmers got together to perform on Wednesday nights at Astoria Pool. The Aquazanies wore costumes and treated audiences to choreographed swimming acts with music, backdrops, props, and on occasion, even dogs. (We actually have videos of this in our Parks Photo archive.) Their routines were always inventive and never failed to showcase their unique talent as swimmers and divers. One of the participants was Whitney Hart, who became a professional diver and was eventually inducted into the Swimming Hall of Fame.
- Today, I am sorry to say that Astoria has lost a bit of the glamour of the heyday of the 1940's. Signature elements such as the sculpted diving nymphs have disappeared from its façade. Parks has spent approximately \$2.5 million since 1994, on

incremental repairs over many years but will seek to begin a top to bottom preservation assessment to slowly but surely restore this facility to its former glory. The popularity of Astoria is noted in our attendance records today that show 114,353 annual visitors and daily counts of 1,682 swimmers. With daily capacity for 2,178 swimmers, it is one of New York City's largest pools in the system.

- As for Orchard Beach, Robert Moses fondly named it “The Riviera of the Bronx,” and it is one of his signature accomplishments. Robert Caro wrote in the *Power Broker* that Moses had a vision of creating a beach between two islands in the Bronx—a daunting task but one that Moses was determined to accomplish.
- Moses's ambitious \$8 million plan to renovate the area called for a parking lot, bathhouse, and, most impressive, 115 new acres of land using over 3 million cubic yards of sanitation landfill to join Rodman's Neck and Hunter Island. Construction crews added white sand from the Rockaways in Queens and Sandy Hook, New Jersey to the beach at a rate of 4,000 cubic yards a day. A 50-foot-wide promenade was built parallel to the shore and a massive 1,400 foot-long, 250 foot-wide mall led to the 90,000-square-foot bathhouse, which also offered a restaurant and other concessions.
- Although the project was not fully complete until 1938, construction crews rushed to finish enough of the beach to open it to the public in 1936. On July 25, 1936, more than 18,000 people attended the opening-day festivities, at which Robert Moses and Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia (1882–1947) spoke and which featured fireworks, music from the Police Department Band, and a diving exhibition. A raging success, the so-called “Riviera of New York City” attracted over 50,000 visitors the first weekend it was open. In 1947, the beach was extended 1.1 miles by filling in the shallow water between Hunter and Twin islands, adding even more acreage to the beach. Today Orchard Beach is extremely popular, attracting 1.6 million visitors a year during the summer months with average daily attendance of 16,000 people.
- Orchard Beach, though not as intact as Astoria Pool, still retains the dramatic character of the Moses era. Since the early 1990's, Parks has invested over \$18.7 million in the improvement of the beach and surrounding landscape. Over the next several years Parks will continue to seek sympathetic, adaptive uses to bring life and vitality to the enormous bathhouse.
- While many other Moses era facilities in Parks are worthy of designation and protection, these two signature WPA era facilities set a fine example of the quality of design and construction that made New York Parks famous. It was during this era that the standard details of New York City parks became the essential “playbook” for urban parks across the country. As we look back at 70 years of progress in New York City Parks, we see the protection of these structures as an essential part of our stewardship of this vast and impressive park system.