

The New York Times

N.Y. / Region

June 28, 2012

Empty About 3 Decades, Pool From the Depression Era Reopens to Cool Off Brooklyn

By **LISA W. FODERARO**

For 28 years, McCarren Pool sat empty on the Williamsburg-Greenpoint border in Brooklyn, its enormous basin growing cracks and sprouting weeds. One by one, the 10 other public pools that opened in New York City during the scorching summer of 1936 were revamped, but not McCarren. A generation of Brooklyn children learned of its invigorating charms only from their parents who had swum there when they were children.

That all changed on Thursday, when Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, joined by longtime residents as well as newcomers, officially reopened the pool after a 30-month, \$50 million renovation. “This pool has an illustrious past and a bright future,” Mr. Bloomberg told a crowd assembled by the shimmering turquoise expanse.

After a few more speeches and a countdown from 10, dozens of young swimmers jumped in, along with **Adrian Benepe**, the commissioner of the Department of Parks and Recreation, who is leaving his post after Labor Day.

“It’s awesome — just the right temperature,” Mr. Benepe said after swimming the width of the pool, which holds 1,057,914 gallons of water and can accommodate 1,500 swimmers.

It was a day many in attendance never thought would come. After the pool fell into disrepair and then closed in the 1980s, arguments — some racially tinged — simmered over its fate, with historic preservationists pressing to have McCarren restored to its original glory and some residents of the traditionally Italian and Polish neighborhoods **advocating its demolition**, to keep outsiders from using it. The debates were fruitless, however, since there was no money for either a restoration or a demolition.

But in the 28 years that the pool lay idle, the neighborhood changed, with painters, photographers, designers and other artists moving in and developers erecting shiny condominiums. In 2005, the empty pool took on a new identity as an outdoor stage for concerts and dance performances. Two years later, the Bloomberg administration announced an ambitious plan for green initiatives, including an infusion of money for several historic park properties, among them McCarren.

At first, some residents who had fond memories of seeing Sonic Youth and the Beastie Boys at the defunct pool bristled at news of its rebirth. That changed, though, as word spread of the **extensive renovation by Rogers Marvel Architects**, which preserved the historic brick bathhouse while adding a fitness center, basketball court and community meeting space. Sprinkled throughout are design elements in keeping with the local aesthetic, like industrial-looking ceiling fans and the original wire-mesh storage baskets, painted silver, decorating the ceiling.

“The tide of consensus has turned,” said Charles Graeber, a 42-year-old freelance writer who turned out for the opening. “People are really rather proud. This is a very hopeful, grand, Great Society gesture. Williamsburg is famously hipsterish, sneering and ironic, but there’s nothing ironic about this.”

Mr. Graeber had already discontinued his gym membership and planned to join the pool’s fitness center, which costs \$100 a year. “This treats the 99 percent with a 1 percent dignity, which I think will go over well,” he said, surveying the pool deck, where children jumped in spray fountains and a New Orleans-style band was playing “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea.”

Nostalgia prodded June Quercia, 60, to watch the opening ceremony. In the 1950s, she swam in the pool as a young child, and on Thursday, she brought her 32-year-old daughter, Jennifer, to see the restoration. “Back then the dads worked and the moms took the children to the pool,” Mrs. Quercia recalled. “We spent the whole day here. This was our backyard pool.”

Jennifer Quercia seemed sufficiently impressed. “It looks like a country club,” she said.

McCarren becomes the 55th outdoor pool operated by the parks department in New York City; all are free. They opened to the public on Thursday.