improve the human body through athletic endeavor.\textsuperscript{42} High-quality modern design was common, especially in England, Switzerland, and other social democracies. Progressive city councils erected spectacular open-air swimming pools with modernist designs and, in contrast to policies in place at municipal bathhouses, allowed women and girls to swim in these pools and use the surrounding public areas at the same time as men and boys.\textsuperscript{43} The benefits of swimming, sun, and fresh air were highlighted in other sorts of public projects. For example, in 1933, a sleek public health center, designed by Eric Owen Williams, opened in the working-class neighborhood of Peckham in South London (fig. E-5). Run by progressive doctors committed to preventive medicine, the philanthropic facility contained, in addition to medical offices, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a playground, a gymnasium, and a lounge with moveable glass panels that opened to let in fresh air.\textsuperscript{44} Outside Berlin, Richard Ermisch and Martin Wagner expanded the public beach at Wannsee, making it the largest inland facility of this sort in Europe when completed in 1930 (fig. E-6). The new pavilion, lauded as an outstanding example of the New Objectivity, was an enormous two-story structure with four halls, roof terraces for sunbathing and sports, and a grand promenade along the water.\textsuperscript{45}

Aware in all likelihood of at least some of these projects and with the success of Jones Beach not far behind him, Robert Moses launched an ambitious pool-building program in New York City during the New Deal, which he coordinated with beach improvements and the construction of modern sewage treatment plants. “Clean, healthful, and adequate bathing facilities were practically out of the reach,” he wrote, “both geographically and financially, of millions of the city’s inhabitants.”\textsuperscript{46} Although mindful of the need for an affordable program, Moses adopted the economic model promoted by the NRA and insisted that the pools be financially self-sustaining. He instituted admission fees: twenty cents for adults to swim and ten cents for children after 1:00 p.m. In the lean years of the Depression, even these modest charges elicited protest, leading the mayor to urge children to take a morning swim and save their parents a dime.\textsuperscript{47} Nevertheless, as Davidson has argued, the modest fees do not seem to have prevented many people from using the new pools, given the numbers who flocked to them as soon as they opened. La Guardia and Moses faced tough choices in 1936 and 1937 as they struggled to augment the public realm with new social services, and the pool fees were one means used to stabilize the municipal budget.\textsuperscript{48}

The site-selection strategy directly addressed geographic accessibility. On July 23, 1934, Moses announced that the parks department intended to build open-air swimming pools on twenty-three sites across the five boroughs. The press release, written by the commissioner, underscored that the decentralized pool-building program was intended to counter the deleterious effects of water pollution on the daily lives of New Yorkers. “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.”\textsuperscript{49} Moses substantiated the claim with a map showing the areas that were unfit for bathing and those that could be improved. Not surprisingly, he chose to build new open-air swimming pools near these places. He also explained that siting decisions would be directed toward crowded neighborhoods: “the problem therefore resolves itself into one of providing open-air swimming pools, properly located in the most congested sections.”\textsuperscript{50} Moses would continue to emphasize this point. Soon magnificent new open-air swimming pools arose in existing open spaces (mostly parks), with new construction, rather than slum clearance, used to relieve urban congestion. The press release concluded by stating that relief funds (the only resource available) would be used and that construction would begin at nine sites, all but one located in existing parks. Moses made it clear that the design process, relying on typical details and standard plans, had already started.\textsuperscript{51}
In the end, the scope of the work was trimmed from twenty-three to ten new pools; one existing public pool was also fully renovated. When asked in 1936 to explain the rationale for site selection, William H. Latham, the parks engineer and a member of Moses’s inner circle, expanded on points the commissioner had made two years earlier. Latham stated that siting public pools was especially difficult in New York City, given scarcity of land and intensity of use, and that the choices had been determined by population density and available parkland, and also by the need to minimize land acquisition costs and meet the tight construction schedule. Although he did not mention politics, locating stellar works of public architecture in working-class, immigrant, or African-American neighborhoods had an added benefit—that of rewarding political constituencies important to Mayor La Guardia (and the New Deal political project overall).

Most of the new pools were built in parks in working-class neighborhoods, close to playgrounds or other existing recreational and civic facilities (figs. E-7–8). In Manhattan, four outdoor pools were built next to Progressive Era municipal bathhouses; one was erected next to a gymnasium from the Progressive Era; and brand-new bathhouses and large outdoor pools were added to Jefferson, Colonial, and Highbridge parks. In the Bronx, another large pool with bathhouse was constructed in Crotona Park, while the outdoor swimming pools in Faber Park and Brownsville were enlarged, the latter being fully rebuilt. Enormous new pools and bathhouses were added to McCarren Park in Brooklyn and Astoria Park in Queens and to underused sites along the waterfront that were being turned into grand new parks, thanks to the WPA. These sites were in Red Hook, Brooklyn, close to a parcel slated for public housing; in Tompkinsville, Staten Island; and Flushing Meadows in Queens (the site of the 1939 World’s Fair). The barge pools were also renovated and made into a modern bathhouse and two pools (fig. E-9).

Why did Moses elect to build pools on existing public sites, adding facilities to the standing network of recreational space, rather than constructing an entirely new infrastructure for aquatic recreation (as, for example, was done for parkways and public housing)? The reasons historians have offered for this pragmatism include stiff competition for urban space and the need for economy and expediency, which prevailed in all WPA-funded projects (prompted by the concern that federal money would evaporate without warning). Moses’s resistance to pressure from private interests and his tough-minded realism have also been singled out. In fact, when Moses explained his methodology, he underscored the need for practicality, insisting that city planners focus on solving the actual problems of cities rather than trying to implement high-minded plans based on abstract aesthetic, social, or scientific objectives. Although important, these points do not connect the New Deal site selection strategy to other dynamics that shaped urban development in the United States during the twentieth century. Many of the Moses-era pools were located in parks opened in response to the Small Parks Act of 1887 or on sites that were deemed in need of improvement by the Regional Plan. The placement of WPA-funded public facilities on these sites reinforced the reform landscape put in place in New York starting in the late nineteenth century and emphasized the value of a specific kind of recreation: civic, not commercial; uplifting, not honky-tonk; public, not private.

This aspect of Moses’s recreational project for New York shows that reform interventions created a physical armature, a spatial framework that guided the community building of the emerging welfare state. As I have
shown to be the case in other cities, the linkage of new recreational facilities to existing infrastructure extended to the fine grain of community organization, again drawing on Progressive Era models. In the early twentieth century, reformers proposed that small parks and playgrounds be located near public schools, settlement houses, and other reform outposts in working-class communities. The clustering of these facilities, which created nodes of civic amenities in ordinary neighborhoods, integrated social services into the fabric of everyday life. The planning ideal, referred to as the school-park plan, made sense to Moses, who promoted it in the annual reports of the Department of Parks (fig. E-10). The model clearly influenced the siting strategy used for pools and bathhouses. The pools at Sunset, McCarren, Crotona, Colonial, Highbridge, and Jefferson parks were placed close to public schools and near playgrounds opened during the Progressive Era. Similarly, the outdoor pools built next to bathhouses and gymnasia in Manhattan and Brooklyn complemented improvements dating from the Progressive Era. In Astoria Park, the pool, four times Olympic size, was aligned with a war memorial erected in the 1920s.

Of course, the master planner had more on his mind than patiently knitting New Deal public works into the reform landscape of another era. Moses admitted as much when he insisted that public pools be built in large public parks, not on isolated small plots. He also promised that pool construction result in no loss of playground space and that in almost every instance park extensions must replace play space turned over to swimming facilities. The modifications to Jefferson Park in East Harlem reveal how these motives shaped park alterations (fig. E-11). Originally intended to provide a respite for Italian immigrants and playgrounds for their children, Jefferson Park in its pre-Moses layout respected the Progressive Era design paradigm for the reform park. Two oval lawns, dotted with play spaces for children, flanked a genteel promenade that opened onto a Beaux-Arts pavilion overlooking the East River. The park also included farm gardens for children, separate gymnasium for boys and girls, a kindergarten, and public baths. By placing the new pool complex in the center of the park, Moses disrupted existing park uses and replaced space for promenading with the pool and other facilities for active recreation. When the new complex, equipped with athletic fields, bocce courts, playgrounds, and pools, opened on June 27, 1936, the astonishing work of public architecture made clear that the older model of the urban park was history.

**SOUND VERNACULAR MODERNISM**

Architecturally speaking, the spacious brick bathhouses that opened during the hot summer of 1936 belonged to the hard-edged modernist sensibility of the New Deal, not to the genteel decorum of the Beaux-Arts. Lewis
Mumford invented an apt phrase for the Moses-era pool buildings: "sound vernacular modern architecture." As he wrote, "the long brick buildings, with bands of windows that fill their bays form an excellent frame for the pools" and are well suited to the "children of the Machine Age." The sense is that employees of the parks department, who were led up with the fussiness of the Beaux-Arts park landscape, welcomed the new approach to design—the integration of active play, the use of hard surfaces and modern materials, and the grand scale—that arrived when Moses took over the department in 1934. Moses reorganized the department by dividing it into design and construction divisions (similar to the New York City Housing Authority) and hired new, highly qualified professionals, some of whom had previously worked with him and for organizers of other park and pool projects (fig. E-12). In short order, the Moses team included the architects Aymar Embury II, John Matthews Hatton, Dwight James Baum, and Herbert Magoon; the landscape architects Francis Cormier and Gilmore D. Clarke; and the engineers W. Earle Andrews, Carl E. Shaw, and Latham, the parks engineer.

Their mandate was to work fast, very fast. As with site selection, the fear that the federal subsidies for design and construction would quickly evaporate had consequences on what was built. The "New Deal traits of utility, standardization, and austerity," Cutler has argued, affected the pools as much as any other work of architecture subsidized by the federal government in this period. The Department of Parks was required to hire unemployed workers (not necessarily highly skilled in construction) and to use a limited palette of materials that met the fiscal parameters set by the government. These demands pulled the Moses team between two poles, as Architectural Forum pointed out: the desire to stretch New Deal dollars as far as possible and the intent to equip the new pools as fully as possible. Fortunately, "simple materials simply disposed" were used to great effect. The end result was the extraordinary collection of public buildings that won Mumford's praise as sound examples of vernacular modernism.

Although capacious, Mumford's words hardly suggest the range of remarkable structures that WPA construction workers built across the five boroughs. With the federal government amenable to stylistic variety, low-slung mod-
ernist buildings with a touch of classical detail were added to Jefferson, Highbridge, and Sunset parks; monumental structures with enormous central gateways, seemingly inspired by Roman imperial architecture, were built in McCarran, Crotona, Colonial, and Red Hook parks; and sleek modern bathhouses were erected in Astoria and Betsy Head parks. These complexes met the New Deal ideal of providing leisure activities for all ages, while retaining some segregation of uses for convenience and safety. Just beyond the enclosed pool complexes, families could find more opportunities for active recreation, including baseball diamonds, handball courts, and playgrounds.

The Moses-era pool complexes celebrated swimming in the open air, turning the sport into a grand public spectacle. The complexes were enormous (much bigger than most European public pools), the largest of them allowing several thousand people to swim at one time; they offered the requisite variety of recreational amenities; and they were planned for year-round use—pools could become dance floors and changing rooms could become basketball courts, for example (fig. E-13). The standard site plan, usually symmetrical, included grand bathhouses and almost always three inground pools: a large, often very large, reinforced-concrete pool for informal swimming and organized races; a smaller pool for diving; and a wading pool (outside the pool enclosure). The pools were also technically up to date, with modern filtration and aeration systems that were expressive elements in themselves. Great fountains sprayed water into the pools, and underwater lights made it possible for working people to swim at night. Generous paved areas, bleachers, and rooftop terraces offered places for sunbathing, informal socializing, and watching the ongoing pageantry, both inside and outside the pool precincts. The likely objects of attention included divers plunging from astonishing, reinforced-concrete diving platforms, which were graced with one, two, and even at times three tiers of diving boards.

Respecting but not bound by strict definitions of modernism, Embury and his colleagues used brick, concrete, and prefabricated building materials to create monumental bathhouses that added to the sense of theatricality in the pool complexes. In accordance with the tenets of early modernist design, the structural bays of the steel-frame buildings were expressed on brick-clad elevations, and industrial sash and glass block were used to let light into locker rooms. Other design traditions were also freely incorporated, rather more so than in Europe where streamlined modernism prevailed in public
A BETTER PUBLIC

As the swimming pools opened, one each week during July and August of 1936, they won praise in the local press for their grandeur, modernity, and accessibility—qualities that revealed the best face of the New Deal, the social dividend that FDR had promised to deliver during his 1932 election campaign. Again and again, Moses and his colleagues were lauded for putting ordinary people first; for celebrating them with remarkable, technically sophisticated public architecture; for democratizing access to recreation; and for using New Deal dollars to run play schools and day camps and to offer swimming lessons at the pool complexes. The social objectives of these programs were evident to civic leaders, who praised them for expressing Moses’s ideas about children and recreation: “Out of the gangs [and] into the playgrounds.” The architectural press also chimed in, suggesting that innovative design and breadth of social vision went hand in hand. “If you are thinking of designing a system of parks for your own city, you might well go to New York,” Architectural Forum advised. “You will find America’s only modern models for public beaches and public pools. You will find some extremely ingenious innovations in equipment. And above all you will find a constant and invaluable awareness that recreation must be for all the people, not only for the young, but equally for the adult.”

The crowds that thronged the pools and the pool openings only added to the aura of extraordinary success. Moses, a brilliant publicist, staged the events to great effect, drawing thousands of people. The celebrations rose to a crescendo when 75,000 attended the opening of McCarren Pool in Brooklyn at the end of July and concluded in the middle of August with 40,000 coming to the last opening of the season at the new park in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Like many others, it took place at night, to heighten the drama, and was attended by Moses, the mayor, and other politicians who listened to housewives, factory workers, shopkeepers, and children cheer at each mention of President Roosevelt’s name. Moses explained to the crowd that the swimming pool was the first imprint in a much grander scheme that would cover about 50 acres when finished and bring a running track; football, baseball, and soccer fields; tennis and basketball courts; and playgrounds to the working-class community. The films of this and other WPA pools and accounts of them in oral histories give some sense of their astonishing popularity and intensity of their use: by enthusiastic children learning to swim, by ebullient crowds watching swimming races and diving competitions, and by teenagers who courted on pool decks and played basketball, softball, and other sports in converted facilities during the off-season.

The welcome was not uniform, however. According to the New York Times, generally a great fan of Moses, Italian-American residents of East Harlem tried to halt the construction of the Jefferson Pool; protesters marched at pool openings, disputing the WPA wage scale; the owners of private pools objected to competition from the government; and parents objected to admission fees. The effects of ethnic and race prejudice also shaped the human experience of the Moses-made aquatic landscape, underscoring the persistence of ingrained social biases during the New Deal (even as some of them and other restrictive cultural practices were successfully challenged).
For example, Charlotte Oppenheim, a young German-Jewish émigré who arrived in New York City in 1938, welcomed the cultural openness toward women swimming in public, selecting sites in the New York metropolitan area where young men and women felt comfortable swimming together, as she had done in Germany. Yet, Mrs. Oppenheim never swam in a public pool in the city, going instead to Jones Beach and the Rockaways. “That was where working people like us spent our weekend,” she recalled, emphasizing that the beaches were affordable and offered welcome relief from the summer heat. Although aware of the notable quality of the architecture at Jones Beach, she preferred it for other reasons. “Jones Beach was a beach for everybody”—clean, safe, and “mixed,” meaning that all areas of the beach were safe for women and open to Jews and other immigrants. That was not the case, though, for African-Americans. “They had their own beach,” Mrs. Oppenheim said, implying that they swam elsewhere, perhaps on another area of this beach. She noted that Rockaway Beach was even more rigidly segregated than Jones Beach, where sections that remained privately owned were closed to Jews, blacks, and other groups.88

What about other migrants who arrived in New York during the Great Depression? Although Moses’s siting decisions have been tarred with charges of race prejudice, the commissioner did not ignore the needs of the city’s rapidly growing black community in the pool building campaign. For example, his decision to expand Colonial Park along a rock outcrop in western Harlem turned an underused piece of land into a much-needed civic amenity. The need for this sort of investment had been made clear the previous year when race riots exploded in Harlem and the lack of recreational facilities was cited as a contributing cause. The park improvements included the construction of a grand new swimming pool, mall, music pavilion, playgrounds, and Embury’s magnificent and fortresslike brick bathhouse. The pool opened even before the building was fully finished, in part because of the urgent social need, in part to counter charges of racial bias in the city’s public works program. At the opening ceremony, LaGuardia promised a cheering crowd of 25,000 Harlem residents that their community would receive equal treatment as long as he was mayor, and he offered the pool as evidence that the “knockers,” who criticized his administration for treating Harlem unfairly, were wrong. Speaking after the mayor, Moses reported that the pool had been built by the people of Harlem and would be operated by them; he also urged the crowd to take care of the pool (advice that was offered at each opening). The program featured the African-American performers Roland Hayes and Bill Robinson and celebrated black athletic achievement. Nonetheless, with the race riots in recent memory, the stern imagery of this building may have had more than one meaning to people at the festivities.

In Brooklyn, stories of race prejudice cloud the WPA achievements at Betsy Head Park in Brownsville. Christopher Legree, whose grandparents emigrated from the Deep South, was taught about the racist policies that restricted use of the Betsy Head Pool in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Exclusion based on race was in effect in other public swimming pools in the New York metropolitan area, as Martha Biondi has shown, with racial integration raising for whites the unwelcome “prospect of interracial intimacy” as well as being associated with “racist ideas of unclean bodies.” Although Jewish members of the Brownsville community joined with African-Americans to support racial integration, it was an unwritten rule that African-Americans could swim in this Brooklyn pool only in the late afternoon, after white residents had vacated the premises—a rule that was enforced by employees at the Department of Parks, according to Mr. Legree. His recollection of segregation at the pool, confirmed by film footage from the late 1930s that shows a whites-only environment, is in accord with other memories that the park was strictly off-limits to blacks during the New Deal. Moses himself recognized that the differential provision of recreational facilities in Brownsville was problematic. “Even at the present time, Betsy Head Park is hardly large enough to meet the needs of the neighborhood,” he stated in 1941, acknowledging that the completion of Brownsville Houses, a public housing project, would exacerbate the problem. As Wendell Pritchett has pointed out, in communities like Brownsville blacks competed for recreational facilities that did not exist.

Do these observations lend credence to claims, in The Power Broker and elsewhere, that Moses used public swimming pools, playgrounds, and other facilities for public recreation to physically underscore the power of white privilege? Some of Caro’s most damning charges concern Jefferson Pool in East Harlem, largely an Italian-American neighborhood in the 1930s, where, he alleges, the Department of Parks, at Moses’s insistence, hired white lifeguards to work at the pool. This practice, called flagging, was intended to dissuade blacks, who were moving into central Harlem, and Puerto Ricans, who were moving into blocks closer to the pool, from swimming in it; to signal to people of color that the facility was for whites only. Caro also asserts that this particular practice was coupled with an explicit directive, from Moses, to fill the pool with cold water, supposedly because blacks in particular disliked swimming in it. Given that Caro’s sources are not fully identified or dated, these charges cannot be confirmed. But photographs and unedited film footage from the mid- and late 1930s in the parks department archives show Jefferson Pool to be a whites-only environment. Whether or not Moses condoned (or ordered) this policy, visual evidence and other accounts of extreme racial tension in East Harlem in this period lend credence to Caro’s point about de facto racial segregation in this pool. Equally important, however, the water in all WPA pools in New York, including Jefferson Pool and Colonial Pool in Harlem, was capable of being heated. Although this amenity was unusual for outdoor pools in the 1930s, especially those intended only for summer use, it meant that black New Yorkers could swim in heated water, just like other residents.

Oral histories and unedited film footage in the parks department archives shed light on this important issue of Moses, race, and swimming. The films show that in the main white and black New Yorkers swim in different pools, an unsurprising finding given the prevalence of ethnic enclaves and racial segregation in the city’s neighborhoods in the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, the films also show that on occasion black and white New Yorkers did swim in the same public pools, and with apparent indifference to each other: African-Americans used the predominantly white Highbridge and McCarren pools, and whites the predominantly black
Colonial Pool. Oral histories also testify to racial integration, on occasion, at Colonial and McCarren pools. In some pools, at least, the parks department staff tolerated black and white bodies coming in close contact with one another—rather extraordinary given prevailing social norms (at least among whites) in the 1930s and 1940s. 

In the end, and as Judith Davidson has argued persuasively, Moses did use public money to equip black neighborhoods with recreational facilities, especially when pressed by African-American protest. She points out that the number of recreational facilities increased in Harlem and other black neighborhoods during the New Deal and that the African-American community benefited from these resources, even though they may have been built to "dilute black hostility and resentment" of the La Guardia administration and to create physical "buffers" between black and immigrant neighborhoods. Although the steps were limited, she argues that it is unlikely that this sort of provisioning of the public realm during the New Deal would have taken place without Moses—specifically without his masterful manipulation of federal funds. Davidson and other historians have also stated that, the egregious effects of racial segregation notwithstanding, blacks benefited from the commitment of public resources to recreation during the New Deal in other ways: that the Department of Parks hired African-Americans as park workers and that they tended to benefit more than whites from relief employment because they remained unemployed for longer periods of time (again due to the egregious effects of racial segregation in private sector). This last benefit may have been an unintended consequence of New Deal public policy but was nonetheless important to the economy of New York’s black community.

Any use of public recreation to inscribe racial boundaries justly deserves to be condemned. But examples of antidemocratic practices from the 1930s should not blind us to the considerable achievements of the New Deal pool-building project, including occasional tolerance of racial integration. The history of the WPA pools reveals that the contradictory ideals of democratic societies are embodied in public space and architecture, with the relations between civic architecture and the public changing as definitions of citizenship expand or contract. Robert Moses invested in extraordinary public buildings and outdoor spaces that celebrated new ideals of leisure and made clear that providing recreational space is a responsibility of government. Adhering to the New Deal vision of active recreation for adults and children, Moses superimposed monumental modern buildings on existing infrastructure and underused sites. The siting decisions, especially, which were rooted in the reform urbanism of the Progressive Era, made new civic amenities accessible and helped to integrate them into the fabric of everyday urban life. The architectural choices made by Moses and his design team at the Department of Parks stood New Yorkers in good stead in the 1930s and have continued to do so, extending the public realm and in the long run aiding the democratization of recreation overall.

Today, most of the WPA pools remain open for public use and, despite signs of wear, are full of all sorts of New Yorkers: families with children; summer campers; African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and many others who have arrived in the city on the successive waves of migration that continue to enrich the social and cultural fabric of the city. Much as Moses envisioned in the 1930s, new immigrants and young people, especially, come to the pools year-round: to seek relief from the summer heat, to learn to swim, to play games on outdoor athletic fields and inside bathhouse changing rooms, which are still converted to gymnasiums after the pools are drained for the winter. This continuing success, based on forging a progressive relation between citizenship, public health, public space, and the human body, should be inspirational in our time, when the city’s interest in developing and maintaining public amenities has waned and the spread of private indoor facilities supplants the New Deal goal of equipping the public realm with affordable outdoor recreation for all.

NOTES

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10. I am grateful to Ning de Coninck-Smith, Christopher Klemesic, and Roy Kozlovsky for sharing insights on European pools. Also see Worpole, Here Comes the Sun, 113–20; and Stem, Gilman, and Mellins, New York 1930, 717. Although the Moses-era pools in New York City were published in the architectural press, newspapers, and popular journals during the 1930s, since then they have not received much attention from historians. In addition to the overview in Stem, Caro, Power Broker, 456–77; Coplan, “Urban Waters,” 66–70; and Cate, Public Landscape, 23–25.

11. Worpole, Here Comes the Sun, 114, 115. For an overview of swimming pool history, see Van Lentewen, Springboard in the Pool.