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SUSHIL CHEEMA



Dominick, a meticulous and sophisticated Italian-American with thick gray hair that gives him a regal look, does not remember much about the McCarren Park Pool. "I was only a kid," he says. "Me and the guys, the kids in the neighborhood, went once or twice." It was the 1940s, and Dominick, now a resident of Rockland County, lived in Williamsburg. One thing about the pool he does remember distinctly is its size. "It was a big, big pool."

Even today in its rundown state, the sheer size of the McCarren Park Pool is striking. The arch above the main entrance echoes classical Italian architecture, and the crumbling walls covered in ivy parallel a Roman ruin. It has been closed since 1983, and since then, graffiti has accumulated on its interior walls. Some people, including Mieszko Kalita, chair of Community Board 1's Parks and Recreation Committee, consider it an "eyesore" that should be renovated, but others like it just the way it is. Despite some calls in recent years to tear down the structure, recent use of the pool as a performance space has galvanized increased interest in keeping it. The questions that remain are if and how to renovate it.

The McCarren Park Pool was one of 10 giant swimming pools built and opened in New York City during the Great Depression by the Works Project Administration. In the summer of 1936, Parks Commissioner Robert Moses and Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia opened one pool each week. The pools at McCarren Park and Astoria were the largest of the 10, each holding up to 6,800 swimmers. The total cost of the project was \$10 million, with each pool costing about \$1 million.

When it came time for restoration of the site, a group of residents from the surrounding neighborhood of Greenpoint blocked the workers in a move to keep the pool closed. Vandals from other neighborhoods were defacing the structure and residents wanted the intruders to stay away.

Dormant for more than 20 years, the McCarren Park Pool came to life again last fall with a dance performance put together by Sens Production and choreographer Noémie Lafrance. The result of Lafrance's efforts to have the pool reopened for use was a performance called Agora and, according to Lafrance, the show was a success. "About 10,000 people came to see the show," she says.

This summer, a number of events are taking place at the pool, ranging from small community-focused events to larger, corporate-sponsored ones. One of the smaller events was the third annual Billyburg Short Film Festival, which took place at the McCarren Park Pool on Friday, June 30th. "There is a shortage of large venues in Williamsburg and Greenpoint," says the event's organizer, Philippe Chetrit, adding that there is "not something bigger than 300 people." Lafrance's Agora intrigued Chetrit, president of a Williamsburg-based arts and media development organization called Rabbit in a Turtle Shell (RIATS). "We saw that Agora did it and thought, 'Why the hell can't we do it then?'" he says of holding an event at the pool.

JellyNYC is hosting a free concert series called Pool Parties at McCarren Park Pool on Sundays this summer. The concerts will include "great DJs, inflatable slip-and-slides and a dodgeball tournament" that will take place while the bands are performing, says Sarah Hooper, one of the event organizers. The setting and the events themselves, she says, "will blow people's minds."

Despite her excitement about the venue, Hooper acknowledges the controversy surrounding the pool. "It's been like a war zone for 25 years whenever you mention the McCarren Park Pool," she says.

The most contentious point in the performances taking place at the pool this summer is the involvement of Live Nation, an event promotion company that started as a part of the media giant Clear Channel but formed its own company in January. Last summer, Live Nation answered a call put out by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation for event proposals that would help raise money for the pool, says Jaime Roberts, publicity coordinator for Live Nation. In conjunction with Sens Productions, Live Nation spent \$250,000 to make the pool performance-ready.

In exchange for the financial support, says Phil Abramson, a spokesman for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, both companies were allowed to use the pool for performances. This summer, Live Nation will hold six rock concerts at the site and will charge \$33.50 to \$45 for tickets. A portion of the proceeds, Roberts adds, will go directly to fundraising efforts to restore the pool.

"There is concern that some of the bigger players might want to dig their claws in if they see it's a great venue," says Leah Kreger, an architect with Indamine Ochre Architecture. Kreger has been involved in recent discussions about what should be done with McCarren Park Pool. She sees the need to talk to the community and develop a better sense of how the space can best serve the neighborhood and envisions a "multi-functional complex" but is fine with the concerts so long as it's only temporary.

Kreger's goal is to develop a schematic design within the next year and hold a groundbreaking ceremony for construction and renovation by the upcoming 75th anniversary of the pool's opening. But, she says, "We want to get broader political and financial support before getting too focused on the details."

"Ideally we would like to restore it as a pool," says Abramson. But recent estimates put the restoration at an estimated \$40 million. Currently, Abramson says, the site is being used for "interim" purposes. "It used to be padlocked. You couldn't even walk on the site."

The current projects taking place at the pool are drawing attention to it. "The site is becoming visible," says choreographer Lafrance. "It is taking on a political stance in it's own right."

Attention to the pool is welcome news to Phyllis Yampolsky, a Greenpoint resident for 24 years who founded the Independent Friends of McCarren Park 18 years ago to help save and restore the site. In her spacious, airy Greenpoint home last Thursday, she spoke about her crusade. "It used to be very different than what's going on there now," she says of the concerts and dance performances in comparison to the fundraising and awareness events she organized in the early 1990s. "It was all neighborhood stuff then" with "all neighborhood people."

Playing videos of two events that feature performances by locals, ethnic music, children's activities and even a rodeo, Yampolsky eagerly shares her own experiences working for the pool's restoration. Yampolsky hopes to convert the space into a "multi-use, year-round facility" that would include a skating park, gym, dining area, food court and amphitheater in addition to a pool. Separating the area with grandstands would create three distinct income-producing areas. Renowned architect Robert A.M. Stern has made a model of Yampolsky's vision and she uses it to encourage interest in the site's possibilities.

Overall, she hopes to see it as a "full-service, genuine community center." As for the concerts, Yampolsky says, "[I] wasn't in favor of the large-scale concerts because they are not related to the community or its personnel." The trouble, Yampolsky recognizes, is money. "We need the generosity that simulates what put together that pool in the 1930s to put that pool together now," she says.

Lafrance hopes to see the McCarren Park Pool itself become a town center. In a follow-up performance called Agora II to take place this fall, the audience members will be both players and viewers, and the performance itself will be designed to be like a game. Lafrance also wants to keep the surrounding Williamsburg and Greenpoint communities involved, so she is integrating dance and theater groups from the community as much as possible. Raising awareness about the pool is the general shared goal of those interested in its future. Through public performances, Abramson says, "People will see what it was and what it can be."