

PUBLIC BATHS, Northeast Corner of East 23rd Street and Asser Levy Place.
Built 1904-06; architects Arnold W. Brunner and William Martin Aiken.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 981. Lot 2 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On November 27, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Public Baths, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 14). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration which operates the Public Baths has indicated its support of the proposed designation of its building.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Public Baths were built between 1904 and 1906 by the City of New York. The building was designed by Arnold W. Brunner and William Martin Aiken, associated architects for this project. Public baths were a necessity for many New York City residents during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The area of Manhattan north of City Hall up to 23rd Street and east to the river had an extremely high population density. The residents of this area were housed in overcrowded tenements which for the most part contained no bathing facilities. Consequently public baths served an important need. The Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Commission now administers the building as an indoor swimming pool.

This neo-Classical Roman style bathhouse is a distant descendant of the famous Roman baths; consequently, Brunner and Aiken considered the Roman style appropriate for this 20th-century version.

The one-story red brick building with its limestone base and ornamental details is roughly cross-shaped in plan. The entrance block faces Asser Levy Place. Its front facade is strikingly accented by four pairs of free-standing columns which flank two entrances—one for each sex. The two entrance doors are crowded by triangular pediments with shield motifs and carried on scrolled brackets. Each door is set into a large arched opening enframed in stone with a scrolled keystone. Multi-paned windows with diagonal muntins fill the arch above and flanking each door. The center of the facade, between paired columns, is accented by a fountain set in a niche. Above the fountain are three horizontal bands of stonework simulating falling water surmounted by an arch containing an elaborate scallop shell.

The facade is surmounted by a full entablature with modillioned cornice, decorated frieze, and shallow architrave. It comes forward above the paired columns and is crowned by urns, one above each column. The frieze contains the inscription "Free Public Baths, City of New York" above the arches. This section of the building is surmounted by a roof balustrade with paneled blocks above the columns. A large swag-decorated shield, containing the emblem of the City of New York, rises above the balustrade over the fountain at the center of the facade.

The side facades of the entrance block contain round-arched window openings with paneled brickwork beneath them. The side wings of the building, which contain showers and dressing rooms, have similar round-arched windows. They are also surmounted by simple dentiled roof cornices. The rear wing, which contains the swimming pool, is simpler in style. The center of the cruciform building has a gable-ended copper roof with skylights.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Public Baths has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Public Baths are an exceptionally handsome example of the neo-Classical Roman style of architecture, that they employ an interesting contrast of materials and a wealth of carved detail, that they enhance the site and the neighborhood, and that they have served a most necessary community function for many years and continue to do so as an indoor neighborhood swimming pool.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Public Baths, Northeast corner of East 23rd Street and Asser Levy Place, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 981, Lot 2 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.