

Architecture

How a Pool Grew in Brooklyn

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THERE is a handsome new municipal swimming pool in Bedford-Stuyvesant called "The People's Pool." Chalk up one more achievement for the Bed-Stuy community.

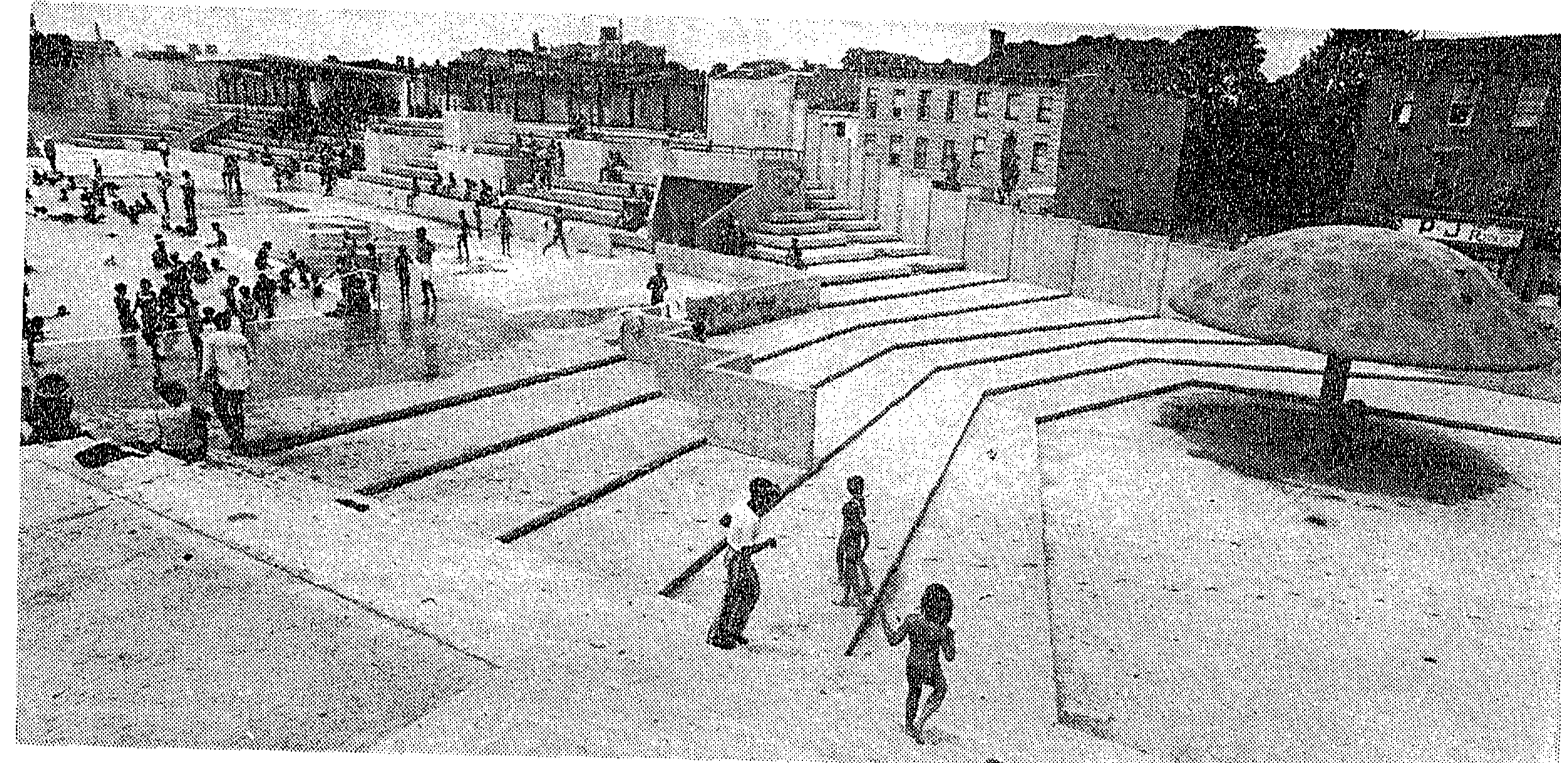
The pool, a facility for 3,000 on a 2.3-acre city block, is also a case history of the way things are done in New York — a process conventionally compounded of Kafka and bits of "Catch-22." It offers clear indications of why architects have come to abhor and fear working in the city, particularly if they try to do something different or better than the municipal norm, and why everyone gets paranoia in the process.

The saga started, according to Alan Lapidus of Morris Lapidus Associates, in high spirits on a fine summer day in Central Park in 1966, when then Parks Commissioner Thomas Hoving commissioned the Lapidus office to design a pool that would be an imaginative departure from institutional public facilities. It ended on a blustery November day in 1971 with both men sadder and wiser. "A funny little six-year odyssey," Alan Lapidus calls it now, in the summer of '72, when the pool is finally in almost full use.

Six years is about double the time that should have been required for the job—a standard consistently maintained by the city for surprisingly consistent reasons. It should be noted that this job was "expedited." There was no sinister cabal to foil it: There was just the usual amount of unconscionable delay while approvals and procedures got bucked through the usual agencies; the normally ludicrous incompetence, willful non-cooperation and backing and filling, and the expected amount of built-in bureaucratic obstructionism for its own sake. "If it were only because of that plot that everyone is looking for," Lapidus says of the city's non-workings. "But it's just people doing their job."

What got built, finally, is a large, reinforced concrete complex of swimming, diving and wading pools with touches of color and bright brick that tries to show, in spite of the overwhelming necessity and visibility of its vandal-proof construction, a sensitivity to people and place.

The concrete wall, for ex-



The recently completed Bedford-Stuyvesant "People's Pool" in Brooklyn, with facilities for 3,000
"The way things are done in New York? A process compounded of Kafka and bits of 'Catch-22'"

ample, is not continuous and does not block the pool off from the community. There is a good use of color, of which there could be still more. To this has been added that popular decorative art form of the '70's, graffiti, which the Parks Department might well leave alone instead of trying futilely to repaint. Much has been done to temper the facility's huge scale.

The plan, conceived by Morris Lapidus, an architect known for his Miami Beach extravaganzas, uses the site skillfully by putting lockers and services a half level below ground, so that the roof becomes a play area, incorporating the mechanical equipment as play equipment, in a multi-level design.

Ventilating stacks have been grouped for a pyramid with slides; others are concealed in a maze of bright-colored, ordinary plumbing pipes that form a jungle gym. Broad steps join the levels, and a water slide ends in the children's pool, which has a sky-blue, plain aluminum pipe fountain. This is fine ingenuity on a tight budget.

There is a small irony involved in the design, in that Hoving wanted an architect who would produce the jazziest pool possible for the grim environs of Bed-Stuy,

and he had the Lapidus Fontainebleau fantasies firmly in mind. What he got was not glitter, but a serious, sophisticated solution. He caught the Lapidus firm in mid-image.

With the entry into the firm of Morris's son, Alan, (the script should probably be changed here to Son of Lapidus) a new design philosophy appeared. Miami is a hard act for the next generation to follow. The new approach, and the new team, included John Bowstead and Marta Enebuske, and the only fantasy was a giant "shade mushroom" in concrete. Hoving's caprice did not materialize, but something good, and appropriate, did.

That it materialized at all, however, is a miracle. Hoving's perfectly rational theory was that if you start with the right architect, the city will get the right kind of architecture. What he and the architects he selected learned, was that what goes on in city work, including all those Machiavellian checking arrangements that are supposed to guarantee that the city does not get cheated, guarantee only that those who know the angles will make a very good thing of it, and the job will take longer and cost more than anything done in the private sector.

The architect is, by implication and legal agreement, victim and fall guy. He is made responsible for the four contractors required by New York State's outrageous multiple contract law, an automatically uncontrollable arrangement. He must get results from hide-bound and rule-bound city agencies locked in cross-purposes, when nothing but a command from the top can move them. Everything is rigged to make him responsible for everyone else's sins, and he is treated as the one potential crook. No one shares his concern for good design and everything is stacked against it. In the end, it is the system that wins.

Nothing, Alan Lapidus says now, could ever repay him for the thought, time and trouble that went into this job. Payroll costs for the architects were \$85,000 over the fees. The contract was not received until nine months after the work was started. It was 15 months before the first payment came. The firm is not fully paid yet. "It was extraordinarily thankless," Lapidus says, "except that the pool got built." And because it got built essentially as he designed it, and because he is hooked on New York, he would do it again.

He would do it in spite of everything, of which, herewith, a few samples. Test borings, essential to basic structural design, were not delivered to the architect by the city until one year and six months after they were told to start work. Haggling over boring costs, which exceeded municipal limits because of the nature of the project, stopped work dead for at least five months.

The city was to deliver a prepared site, ready to build on, to the architects. "Incredibly," the architect's office reported, "the demolition job performed by the city was substandard and illegal." Water and gas lines had not been closed off, sewer lines were left discharging, organic material remained, and extensive fill and further preparation were necessary before construction could start. Haggling over that lasted several more months, while the architect begged for action and construction costs rose.

When Hoving left the Parks Department, the changing of the guard brought additional disaster. A new Department reviewer, ignoring previous reviews, stated, "In my estimation, this job has been designed only for architectural accomplishment and the plan reveals that it is far from be-

ing practical for operation by this department." The architect replied that indeed it was designed for architectural accomplishment, and that it had received previous approvals, and that the "primary objective of this 'architectural accomplishment' has been to comply with every request and requirement of the Department of Parks." This stalemate went on for another six months.

The contractor refused to erect innovative lighting — a pair of 200-foot-high, vandal-proof steel light standards with targeting luminaires that would focus the light directly where needed. Fighting this, the architect found that "you can't do anything in this city for the first time; there must be a precedent. In other words, no change." A precedent was invented at Shea Stadium, Bureaucratic nitpicking, busy elsewhere, never caught up with the play.

The story has a singularly predictable "Catch-22" ending. Those lights, successfully installed, are not being used. There is no night swimming, as planned. The problem seems to be that the switches were vandalized during the winter and no one can find out how to make the city replace them. The system, you see, is foolproof. And the system always wins.