

PUBLIC BATH NO. 7, 227-231 Fourth Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1906-10; architect Raymond F. Almirall.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 955, Lot 1.

On April 4, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Public Bath No. 7 and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The hearing was continued to June 8, 1982. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Two letters have been received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

When opened in 1910, Brooklyn's Public Bath No. 7 was described as being the most ornate public bath which had been constructed in that borough; it was also the first in Brooklyn to boast a "plunge" or swimming pool. None of its predecessors survive today. Designed by Raymond F. Almirall, Public Bath No. 7 is a striking example of the neo-Renaissance style employed for many of the public baths constructed in New York City during the first decade of this century. Use of this style had the effect of giving the act of bathing as much importance as those activities conducted in such similarly styled buildings of the period as banks and libraries; cleanliness was thereby promoted. Intended as part of a larger effort to improve the general level of public health, New York City's public baths were designed to serve the residents of tenement neighborhoods where bathing facilities were often non-existent. By 1912 New York City could claim to have established the largest municipal system of free public baths in the world. It was the culmination of pioneering efforts initiated in this city more than a half century earlier.

With the goal of serving the needs of residents in a densely populated tenement district where bathing facilities were minimal or absent, this country's first public bath and laundry was erected on Mott Street by the People's Bathing and Washing Association, a philanthropic organization incorporated in 1849 by wealthy New York merchant Robert B. Minturn specifically for that purpose. A small fee was paid by some 75,000 users a year, but revenues were insufficient to keep it in operation for more than a few years. Although its demise was later attributed to the fact that it was "too far in advance of the habits of the people whose advantage it sought," an assumption which may or may not be justified, a heightened appreciation of its purpose emerged during the following decade.¹

In the late 1860s the Board of Health urged New York City elected officials to assume responsibility for the establishment of public bathing facilities; enabling legislation was approved in 1868, and by 1870 the east and west shores of Manhattan each had free floating saltwater public baths. Asking, "what a

melancholy contrast to such enlightened public zeal (as Rome showed by its numerous public baths) in behalf of the health of its people does New York City present?" and noting that the "city was surrounded by water which can readily be utilized, with a population half of which never bathe for want of facilities, this city has but two public baths," the Board of Health continued to press for expansion of the system.² Over the next two decades many additional floating baths were authorized and by the end of the century, fifteen could be found anchored at various locations along the Manhattan shoreline. They were located, as were the five in Brooklyn, as close as possible to the working-class tenement neighborhoods they benefited. Although open only from mid-June to mid-October, they provided baths for many thousands each year. By 1896 the annual total of baths recorded exceeded 5½ million.

The end of the century brought with it increasing pollution of the city's surrounding waters and made the development of indoor baths a necessity. Development of a city-wide system of public baths open the year round was part of a wider effort to improve the general level of public health, particularly among less-advantaged groups; other contemporary endeavors such as tenement house reform were a product of the same impetus.

The technology which enabled the development of an indoor public bath system for the masses -- the rain or shower bath -- had been introduced to European military barracks in the late 1850s and by the late 1870s its use had been extended to such institutional settings as prisons and industrial and mining establishments. In contrast to the tub bath, the rain bath was, as an early summary of its advantages observes, "...the simplest, quickest, cheapest, cleanest...least expensive in fitting up..." It was further noted that it required "...the least space, least time in use, least amount of water, least fuel for warming water, and least cost for repairs and maintenance..."³ The 1883 Berlin Public Health Exposition awakened interest in a system of inexpensive public baths for working people and the number of such facilities proliferated thereafter, especially in Germany. These followed the models provided by industrial and institutional baths and furnished, in turn, the prototypes for the New York City public baths.

Later called the "father of free rain baths in America," the German-born physician and hydrotherapist Dr. Simon Baruch undertook a campaign of editorial writing and **speechmaking** in 1889 designed to persuade municipal officials to institute a public bath system in New York City. Public baths, he said, "should be as free as the public parks."⁴ Paralleling the sequence of events which characterized other reformist movements, the initiative in this instance too was seized by private philanthropy.

The concluding resolution of an 1890 conference on the subject attended by most of the city's major charitable organizations stated that "one of the greatest wants in this city was some place where at all seasons of the year hot and cold baths could be had at nominal cost and free if necessary."⁵ Convinced by Dr. Baruch of the impracticability of tub baths and the desirability of rain baths to be used for a facility to be used by the masses, two of the attendees, the New York Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor (Robert A. Minturn was one of its founders) and the City Mission Society, agreed to mount a vigorous subscription campaign to raise funds for such a bath. A

site was leased at the Centre Market Place between Grand and Broome Streets, a location described as being "in the midst of a large tenement house district and adjacent to an industrial center."⁶ Plans for a building were solicited and the one proposed by Josiah C. Cady accepted in 1890. A year later, in August 1891, the Centre Market Place People's Bath opened and was described as the "first in the United States to use spray or rain water in an establishment which is open year round for hot and cold baths."⁷ A small section of the facility was reserved for those willing or able to pay a fee, but the services provided to the majority of its users were free.

Although relatively small compared to the later New York City public baths, the People's Bath established a number of precedents followed by those future buildings. Both sexes were accommodated with separate waiting rooms provided. Twenty-five showers and five tubs, a proportion subsequently repeated in the municipal public baths, offered a capacity of 500 baths a day; in the first three-and-a-half years 300,000 baths were furnished. A clean and airy interior was the goal of its design, an intent manifested on the exterior, described by contemporaries as "early Italian" but actually closer to Romanesque Revival, by the arcade of large round-headed windows which extended across the facade at the second-story level, as well as by the use of white-glazed facing brick. Terra-cotta ornament and a prominent cornice were other striking features. It was a gleaming and inviting presence in a neighborhood dominated by red brick tenements, an effect emphasized by the extremely wide arched entryway at the ground level.

In 1892 a bill which authorized municipalities to establish and operate public bathing facilities -- its sponsor was Goodwin Brown, another ardent proselytizer for the cause -- was approved by the New York State Legislature. Further efforts by Brown resulted in the 1895 law which made the establishment of such facilities mandatory in cities above a certain size; floating baths would not be considered in compliance. The appointment of a Mayor's Committee on Public Baths and Public Comfort Stations in 1895 was New York City's immediate response.

The Committee's lengthy report of 1897, records exhaustive studies on the subject. There were but a small handful of public baths to examine here -- the country's first year-round municipal public bath in Yonkers and the Centre Market Place People's Bath were the prime examples -- so the Committee's attention focused principally on European models. The investigation of bathing establishments in all the major European countries yielded the conclusion that those of Austria and Germany provided the best models. The report concluded with a very detailed set of recommendations for their design and operation together with plans for four public baths prepared by Cady, Berg & See. These had been solicited by the New York Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, its contribution to this municipal endeavor.

Cady's designs were for facilities much larger than his People's Bath but employed the same basic interior organizational scheme. The designs for the exteriors, however, reflected an intensified appreciation of the Renaissance palazzo as a source. The largest bath, which also included a public laundry and comfort stations, was proposed for Tompkins Square Park. A freestanding

structure, its arcaded center block, end pavilions, rusticated ground story and rows of large arched windows at the piano nobile level clearly proclaimed its palatial inspiration. Another Cady design for the facade of a bath to be built at a mid-block location featured tall arched openings at the principal or ground-story level, Ionic half-columns rising from high podiums to define the bays, paired rectangular windows in the attic story, and a prominent cornice.

The exterior designs of the public bath buildings proposed by Cady were clearly intended to dignify, even ennoble, the act of bathing. They suggested that bathing was an act no less meritorious than -- indeed, equal to -- those activities conducted in other structures employing neo-Renaissance and Classical Revival styles -- banks, courthouses, libraries and the like. Equating the public bath with these worthy buildings would provide further incentive to enter and bathe. Cady's use of light-colored facing material for the People's Bath and his proposed use of similar materials for the municipal baths would not only distinguish the public bath from its immediate surroundings, but would also convey a message. Physical cleanliness, obviously desirable from the viewpoint of health, was not yet disassociated from moral rectitude. (The motto of the People's Bath was the familiar "Cleanliness is next to Godliness.") Thus, these light-colored facades would speak of both cleanliness and purity.

It was this design vocabulary which was utilized for the New York City public bath buildings constructed during the first decade and a half of the 20th century. Through their use of neo-Renaissance and Classical Revival styles, Cady and the other designers of public baths would also succeed in extending into the tenement neighborhoods where the baths were located an imposing image inspired by the City Beautiful concept generated by the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. This linkage was pointed out in 1908 by the firm of Werner and Windolph, responsible for the design of several of New York City's new baths. They observed that, "In the early 1890s, in response to an awakening on the part of our American body politic, a movement resulted that can be described as a new social spirit or civic renaissance. It is within the last decade that the bath building has shown some systematic development..."⁸

New York City's first municipally funded free public bath located at 326 Rivington Street opened in March 1901. With a total of 91 showers, it had provided more than 800,000 baths by the end of the following year. Although at a mid-block location, its facade retained many of the features of the Renaissance palazzo intended for Tompkins Square Park, never built, however, because of community opposition. The city's second and third public baths were constructed in Brooklyn. The bath at Hicks and Degraw Streets, opened September 1903, had 63 bathing units and the Pitkin Avenue bath in Brownsville, opened a month later, had 96. Manhattan's second public bath was located at 347 West 41st Street and completed in November, 1904. Both the Brooklyn baths and the West 41st Street bath were, with their large ground-level openings and classicizing ornament, similar to the design for the mid-block bath proposed by Cady. Many new baths were constructed thereafter and by 1912 it could be claimed by city representatives attending the first International Conference on Public Baths held at the Hague, that within a span of eleven years, New York City had succeeded in establishing the "largest system of free public cleansing baths in the world."⁹

There were, as of that date, twelve in Manhattan, seven in Brooklyn, and one each in the Bronx and Queens. Close to 3 million baths annually were provided by the Brooklyn baths and more than 3½ million by those in Manhattan.

The public baths completed in Brooklyn prior to 1906, which included -- in addition to those on Hicks Street and Pitkin Avenue -- the Huron Avenue, Montrose Avenue and Duffield Street baths, were all designed by the Brooklyn architects Axel S. Hedman or Louis A. Voss. None of this early group survive. Planning was begun in 1905 for a second group of structures to be located in communities distant from those already equipped with bathing facilities; these baths were intended to be larger and grander than their predecessors and for them a new set of architects was selected. Public Bath No. 7 is one of this second group which also included baths located on Nostrand Avenue and Hamburg Avenue.¹⁰ It served the densely populated tenement neighborhood which bordered the industrial and warehouse zone developed along the shores of the Gowanus Canal. Begun in 1906, Public Bath No. 7 was not opened until 1910, the result of construction delays. It had earlier been described as the most ornate of Brooklyn's public baths.¹¹ It was also the first in that borough to be equipped with a "plunge" or swimming pool. (The only other designated public bath in New York City, the Public Bath on East 23rd Street designed by Brunner and Aiken and opened in 1908, was the first of the city's baths provided with this amenity.) Public Bath No. 7 was also the first of the Brooklyn public baths to suggest most clearly the palatial sources of its neo-Renaissance style. The designer was Raymond F. Almirall.

Almirall (1869-1939), a Brooklyn native and graduate of Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute and Cornell University, studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts from 1892 to 1896. He began practice as junior partner to John W. Ingle; their Binghamton, New York, City Hall was designed shortly before 1900. Almirall began independent practice soon thereafter and remained active through World War I. His post-war years appear to have been principally devoted to restoration projects undertaken at Versailles, Fountainbleau, Trianon Palace and Rheims Cathedral.

Public buildings constituted a substantial portion of Almirall's earlier practice, particularly between 1905 and 1910. In addition to his design for Public Bath No. 7, his projects for the City of New York included the Municipal Lodging House, Seaview Hospital on Staten Island, Fordham Hospital, Harlem Hospital, many structures on Welfare Island, the 1907 design for the main Brooklyn Public Library and several of its branch libraries.

Almirall worked in a variety of styles. A number of his designs such as Harlem Hospital and the Brooklyn Main Library are fairly standard versions of the then popular classicizing styles. Departures from the conventional, however, form an appealing component of his oeuvre. The clustered elongated domes crowning the great tower of his 1905 St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn suggest the selection of an atypical source, perhaps Perigordian, for this Romanesque Revival structure. Almirall's proto-modern design for Seaview Hospital is enlivened by his use of polychromatic ornament and coloristic effects. A similar taste for colorism is seen in his Emigrant Industrial Savings Bank at 51 Chambers Street, a building which also housed the architect's offices. This penchant is also one of the distinctive characteristics of Public Bath No. 7.

Built on a double lot located at the northeast corner of the Fourth Avenue and President Street intersection, Almirall's Public Bath No. 7 is a conspicuous and imposing structure within the context of its immediate environment. Its elevation -- one which evokes the palatial sources of the Tompkins Park and Rivington Street baths -- consists of a fenestrated basement level, housing originally the swimming pool, laundry and service area, and which, together with the entry level, provides a podium for the second or principal story. On the entry level there was a centrally located office, flanking waiting rooms for men and women and, to the rear of these, a balcony which encircles the pool below and was occupied by 34 shower units. On the floor above there were 30 showers for women, 41 for men and a total of 9 tubs.

At the podium level, the five bays of the President Street elevation and the three bays of the Fourth Avenue facade are divided by rusticated piers of terra-cotta block finished in a manner to suggest limestone. The men's and women's entrances occupy the lateral openings on the Fourth Avenue face; the center opening at this level is divided by two wide stucco-faced mullions; concrete block infill has replaced the original windows here as it has in the similarly designed window openings on the President Street side. Originally the sash used at this level may have consisted of long, single-paned windows (with double units in the center section) topped by pivoting transoms.

The white-glazed brick facing laid in Flemish bond of the principal story provides a striking contrast to the neighboring red brick rowhouses. The three tall arched windows which take up most of the main facade, the three similar but slightly lower and narrower openings on the President Street side and the tall rectangular windows which flank them are the dominant features of this story. The profile of the round-headed openings is reiterated by the arched molding of terra cotta simulating limestone located above the bricks forming voussoir-like patterns in their upper portion. This molding also links these openings into an arcade. The intrados of the actual openings and the outer edges of the inset panels below them are defined by courses of limestone-colored terra-cotta blocks. These inner bands extend to bases of similar material placed atop the rusticated piers and evoke an arched opening much larger than that which exists. Window openings are filled by pairs of broad mullions intersected by equally wide cross-bars placed at the point of springing. Much of the small-paned sash remains intact behind the tin sheets which now seal these openings.

The heavy projecting cornice of simulated limestone with its prominent lower molding and closely-set modillions is crowned by a slightly setback parapet wall composed of piers and intervening panels which rest on similarly spaced brackets. The cornice and parapet wall establish an emphatic horizontal and provide a contrast to the voids of the walls below. The legend "Public Bath" is inscribed in the center section of the Fourth Avenue parapet.

Much of the most prominent ornament alludes to the purpose of the structure. The faces of the parapet piers, for example, are adorned with urn mouths of blue-glazed terra cotta; streams of green water flow out and down to the base of the pier. Below these piers the aqueous theme is repeated by the T-shaped blue terra-cotta insets abutting the lower molding of the cornice. These contain images of Triton, scion of the sea god Poseidon. A half beast/half human visage

fills the base of the T; the fish-like tail entwines the god's symbol - a trident - and fans out to form the bar of the letter. Tridents and the borders enclosing the insets are both gold-hued. The base of the large corbels located at the apexes of the arched windows on the Fourth Avenue facade are adorned with large scallop shells and smaller shell forms are tucked under the ends of their upper volutes. The volutes at the apex of the swags above the rectangular windows on President Street are embellished with scales. Shell shapes also adorn the pilasters flanking the main doorways.

More conventional classicizing ornament also appears. The gable soffits of the pediments above the main entrances, for example, are decorated by bands of acanthus leaves; an egg-and-dart molding enframes the door opening. The panel infill below the window portion of the center main story is decorated with bands of acanthus and egg-and-dart. Heavy foliate swags emphasize the upper portions of the rectangular windows.

The use of water-related and classically inspired ornament is characteristic of New York City's early 20th century public bath buildings, however, a distinctive feature of this building is the decorative role played by color. In addition to the strong accents of blue and green in the upper zone, there appear gold-colored backgrounds which contrast with the stone-colored oval moldings ornamenting the panels used in the outer sections of the parapet walls. The parapet coping picks up a lighter hue of this same color. Subtler coloristic effects also appear; for example, the yellow-beige stucco applied to the inset panels beneath the President Street window openings is matched by the color applied to the mullions of window openings at the entry level story. The facing brick is not pure white but flecked with brown. These coloristic effects mark Public Bath No. 7 as a significant signature piece within the body of Almirall's most distinctive works.

Further decorative touches were provided by ornamental ironwork. Some have vanished, most noticeably, the four large lanterns which projected from the standards still in place on the rusticated piers of the Fourth Avenue facade. The grillework panels originally in the basement level window openings are missing, but the coffered panels in the lower portions of the lateral second-story windows of the facade survive. The handsome railings with decorative upper borders and inset diamond-shaped and circular panels located on the staircases and landings leading to the men's and women's entrances are also intact. These railings, together with the granite steps and stairwalls, copings and foundations of terracotta finished to simulate stone, create a monumental entrance. The simpler iron picket fence running along the President Street side appears to be relatively early although it is not part of the original fencing.

The neighborhood's older residents still remember Public Bath No. 7, its conversion to a gymnasium in the 1930s and its closure and abandonment in the 1950s. In the recent past it has served as a warehouse.

Almirall once described himself as a "lifetime resident of New York City who is jealous of her unparalleled civic achievements."¹² The system of public baths established by the City of New York during the early years of this century must be numbered amongst those successes. Public Bath No. 7 is not only one of the handful which survive, it also records one of the many contributions made by Almirall himself to New York City's "unparalleled civic achievements."

FOOTNOTES

1. Mayor's Committee of New York City, Report on Public Baths and Public Comfort Stations, (New York: 1897), p.27.
2. Ibid., p.28.
3. William Paul Gerhard, Modern Baths and Bath Houses, (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1908), p.76.
4. William Henry Hale, "Report on his attendance as delegate representing the City of New York at the International Conference on Public Baths held at the Hague, August 27-30, 1912," in New York City, City Record, 40:12 (December, 1912), 10678-10679.
5. New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, The People's Baths, (New York: n.p., n.d. 1890?), not paginated.
6. Mayor's Committee, Report on Public Baths, p.37.
7. The People's Baths, 9 Centre Market Place: A Study on Public Baths, (New York: n.p., n.d. (1896)), p.2.
8. Harold Werner and August P. Windolph, "The Public Bath: The American Type," The Brickbuilder, 17, (April 1908), 70.
9. Hale, "Report on his attendance," p.10678.
10. Helmle, Huberty & Hudswell designed the bath on Nostrand Avenue, and Bernstein & Bernstein the Hamburg Avenue bath. Selection of a different group of architects for the later baths may be related to the desire for more imposing facilities.
11. Borough of Brooklyn, Report of the President of the Borough of Brooklyn for the Year 1908, (New York: n.p. 1909), p.192.
12. Raymond F. Almirall, A Reply to the Report of the Committee on Inquiry Into the Departments of Health, Charities and Bellevue and Allied Hospitals in the City of New York, (New York: Raymond F. Almirall, 1914), p.23.

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Public Bath No. 7 has 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, Public Bath No. 7 is one of the few buildings remaining from what was described in 1912 as the largest municipal system of free public baths in the world, a system which was the early 20th century culmination of the movement initiated by this country's first public bath established on Mott Street by the People's Bathing and Washing Association in 1850; that Public Bath No. 7 is a striking example of the neo-Renaissance style employed for many of New York City's public bath buildings, a usage intended to lend dignity to the facility and its function by equating it stylistically with other meritorious buildings such as banks and libraries; that Public Bath No. 7 was described when nearing completion in 1908 as more ornate than any of the earlier baths constructed in Brooklyn and the first to be equipped with a swimming pool; that the use of polychromed terracotta ornament and other coloristic effects make Public Bath No. 7 a signature work of its architect, Raymond F. Almirall; and that Public Bath No. 7 is one of the many significant contributions made by that architect to the body of New York City's turn-of-the-century municipal architecture.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Public Bath No. 7, Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Tax Map Block 955, Lot 1, as its Landmark Site.

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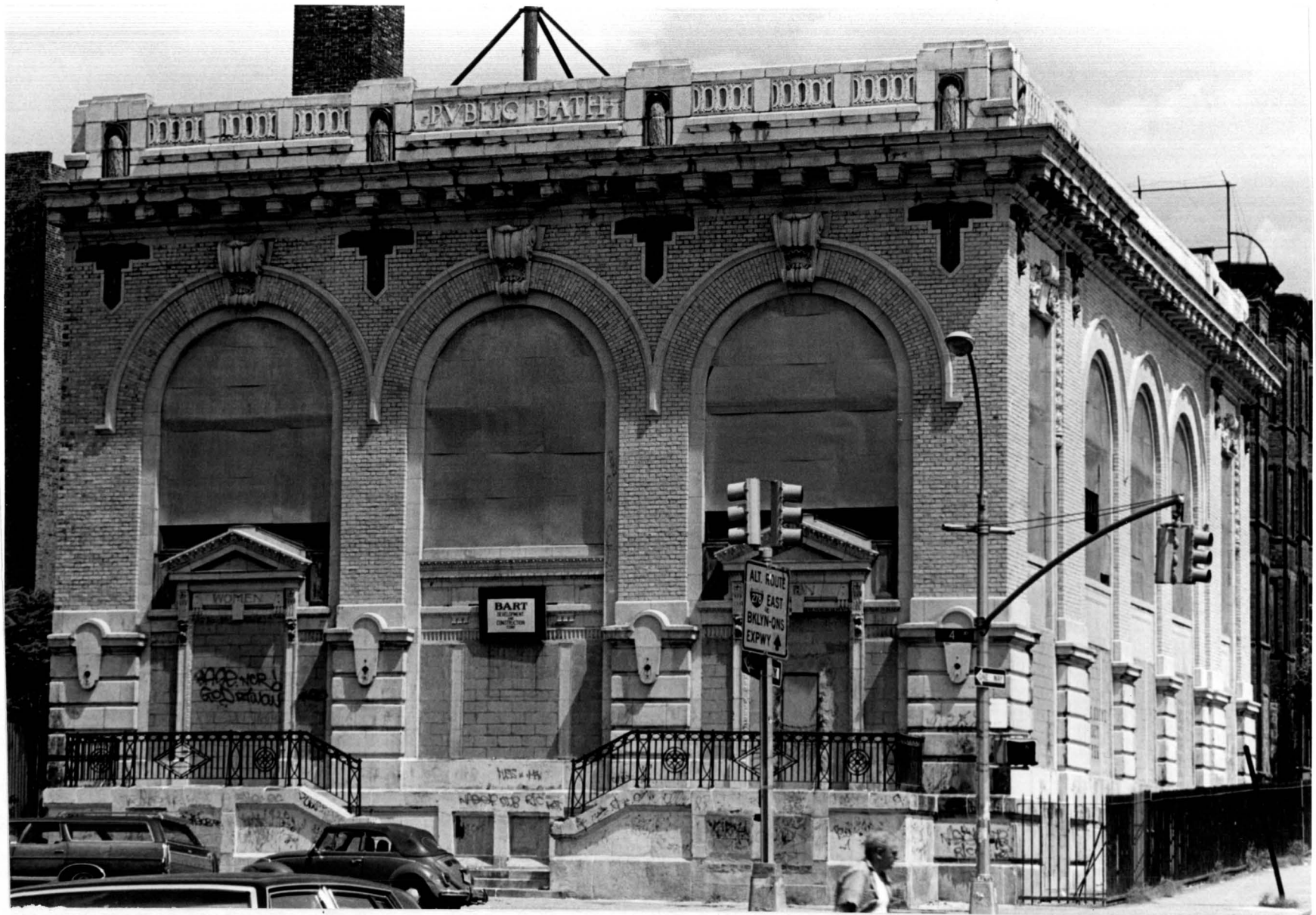


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Landmarks Preservation Commission

Public Bath No. 7
227-231 Fourth Avenue

Architect: Raymond F. Almirall
Built: 1906-1910