

From Eyesore To Landmark

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Even before it was completed in 1944, the Municipal Asphalt Plant at York Av. and 91st St. was assailed by Robert Moses as "horrible modernistic stuff."

Soon after, the Museum of Modern Art celebrated it in an exhibit, along with Rockefeller Center, as one of the latest "outstanding examples of good design."

When the cement-mixing plant — a 90-foot high parabolic arch long a scenic curiosity for passing motorists — ceased operating in 1968, the city wanted it torn down. A wrecker's ball went to work. But the reinforced concrete structure withstood the demolition attempt, so the vacant building was left standing.

Since 1972, the three acres surrounding the arch-like structure have been in active use as an athletic field. Now there are plans by a community group to turn the former cement plant into a recreational center.

It was a small neighborhood group that pushed for the sports center idea almost four years ago,

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while other were promoting a \$43 million public school and combination of low-income and luxury housing. Now a small group, the Neighborhood Committee on the Asphalt Plant, has grown in size and has community-wide support. Many others have come to recognize what the committee's leader, Dr. George E. Murphy, has said all along.

"This site is the only grass playing field on Manhattan's East Side between Sixth and 112th Streets, from the East River to Central Park," Murphy said. "The need for activity facilities for our youth has been tremendous."

Since the fall of 1973, when the athletic fields — soccer, football, basketball — were first put into use, thousands of kids from 42 public and private schools and over 90 organized youth groups

have used them, notes Murphy, a pathology professor at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center.

Tomorrow, the Landmarks Commission is expected to designate the eye-catching building a city landmark. The smooth-curved building has been cited as an important example of successful functional architecture.

"We are taking an industrially obsolete building and recycling it," Murphy says with a smile, noting that more than \$100,000 in privately raised funds have supported the outdoor facilities so far. Now, however, they're out to raise \$1 million for the building's conversion.

Plans for conversion have been drawn without charge by Kahn and Jacobs, the same architectural firm that designed it. Ely Jacques Kahn and Robert Allan Jacobs formed their partnership in 1940 and became well known for their commercial, industrial and institutional structures.

When the cement plant was built in 1944 it was the first building in New York to make use of the parabolic arch form. It exemplified the architectural credo of form following function,

It was completely self-supporting, eliminating the need for interior columns, and made use of reinforced concrete when it was still a novel building material.