How can oral history be used to strengthen the preservationist’s argument for significance? This thesis uses the history of McCarren Pool, the largest of eleven giant public swimming pools built between 1934 and 1936 by Robert Moses and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), as a case study to investigate how firsthand, user/occupant experience of a historic resource can bolster the preservation argument when incorporated into both architectural analysis and the historical narrative.

A facility with monumental architecture and a capacity of over 6,800 swimmers, McCarren Pool served North Brooklyn for 47 years until it was permanently closed in 1984, a victim of neglect, ethnic conflict, and community discord. This thesis argues for McCarren Pool’s preservation and future restoration by using oral histories collected in the community from former pool users, as well as archival documents, newspapers and images, to construct a complete history of the pool and its community to the present time. Chapter one examines the theory of oral history, its use in historic preservation to date, and methodology used in interviewing. Chapters 2 and 3 look at the historical context surrounding the construction of the WPA pools; the social and economic forces that led to their construction, and the architects and laborers involved. Chapter 4 examines the communities of North Brooklyn that benefited from the pool, while chapter 5 documents the pools architecture from the perspective of those who used it. Chapters 6 and 7 examine the social and economic forces that led to the decline and closure of the pool, as well as the ensuing political and community conflicts over the pools future. Current proposals for the pool’s preservation and reuse, as well as possible planning strategies are considered in the final chapter and conclusion.