

Public School 48 (now P75Q at P.S. 48, The Robert E. Peary School)

**155-02 108th Avenue (aka 155-02 – 156-00 108th Avenue; 108-01
– 108-03 155th Street), Queens
Tax Map Block 10144 Lot 42**

Built: 1932-1936

Architect: Walter C. Martin

Style: Art Deco

Proposed Action: Calendared June 9, 2020; Public Hearing August 4, 2020



Public School 48, June 2020, Lisa Kersavage

Proposed in 1931 and completed in 1936, the Art Deco style Public School 48 in Jamaica represents an extensive construction program undertaken by the NYC Board of Education to relieve overcrowding in existing school districts and to meet the needs of new growing residential neighborhoods after World War I. It is a notable design by its architect, Walter C. Martin, and an early use of the Art Deco style for elementary school buildings, demonstrating innovations in school planning and a stylistic shift away from the more traditional revival styles commonly used in the early 20th century and into the 1940s.

Jamaica, one of the five towns that made up Queens county prior to 1898, encompassed the area south of today's Grand Central Parkway stretching from Brooklyn to what is today the Nassau County line. The village of Jamaica, centered around today's Jamaica Avenue, was a vital link between the farms of Long Island and the markets of New York. The downtown developed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as a result of improved roads and public transportation. South Jamaica, the area south of Liberty Avenue, between Merrick Boulevard and the Van Wyck Expressway, was dominated by large farms until the turn of the 20th century; but, by World War II the area was fully developed.

Plans for a single city-wide school system began prior to New York City's consolidation and a reorganized Board of Education was established in 1901 to administer the system. The prior year the state legislature had amended the Consolidated School Law governing the city's schools, abolishing segregated schools for African-American children. By 1901 Public School 48 was established in a one-story wood schoolhouse, which had been built in 1886 as Jamaica's "colored school". Public School 48 was housed there until the new school was completed in 1936.

The neighborhood's population grew in the 20th century as South Jamaica was developed, and a diverse working-class neighborhood grew around the area that would be chosen for the new school. Efforts to replace the old school house had begun as early as 1905 but it was not until 1931 that plans to build the new Public School 48 at 108th Avenue and 155th Street were first announced. In 1932 it was reported that the new school would be the first to be built along the "P" type plan, originally developed by Superintendent of Buildings Walter C. Martin in 1930, incorporating an extended auditorium wing with space for more classrooms. At Public School 48, the proposed auditorium wing was never added.

Walter C. Martin served as Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education from 1928 until 1938, during which time he designed hundreds of new schools and/or additions to existing schools throughout the five boroughs, including 34 new elementary schools and 5 high schools in Queens alone. Martin's school designs were executed in a variety of styles from Renaissance Revival, to Colonial Revival, to Art Deco, displaying the range of stylistic approaches to school design in the interwar period. Martin used the modernistic or Art Deco style for some large projects, such as his 1929-31 Herman Ridder Junior High School in the Bronx, perhaps his most notable building and a New York City landmark, and adapted it for smaller elementary schools like Public School 48.

Constructed between 1932 and 1936, Martin's design for the three-story Public School 48 imparts a sense of monumentality appropriate to a civic structure, anchored with strong corner towers and featuring vertical piers with stylized foliate capitals. His use of the Art Deco style drew inspiration from industrial and commercial buildings and incorporated distinctive decorative treatment such as bi-color brick spandrel panels, bi-color terra-cotta plaques evocative of the importance of education, granite entrance surrounds topped by stylized eagles that harbor bronze doors with bronze-enframed multi-light transoms, and large stylized cartouches.

Prominent within the neighborhood of South Jamaica, Public School 48 has served the community for more than 70 years. Little changed since its opening on May 4, 1936, it is a highly intact example of Walter C. Martin's use of the Art Deco style in the 1930s. Its successful blend of Art Deco design elements and massing was novel for elementary schools at the time it was proposed, and it represents a significant early application of the style for New York City schools.

