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Landmarks Preservation Commission
January 30, 1996; Designation List 270
LP-1940

LA CASINA, also known as La Casino, now Jamaica Business Resource Center,
90-33 160th Street, Jamaica, Queens.

Built c. 1933; architect unknown; restoration, 1994-95, Li-Saltzman Architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 9757, Lot 8.

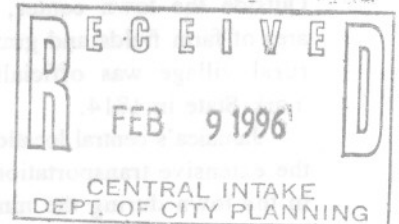
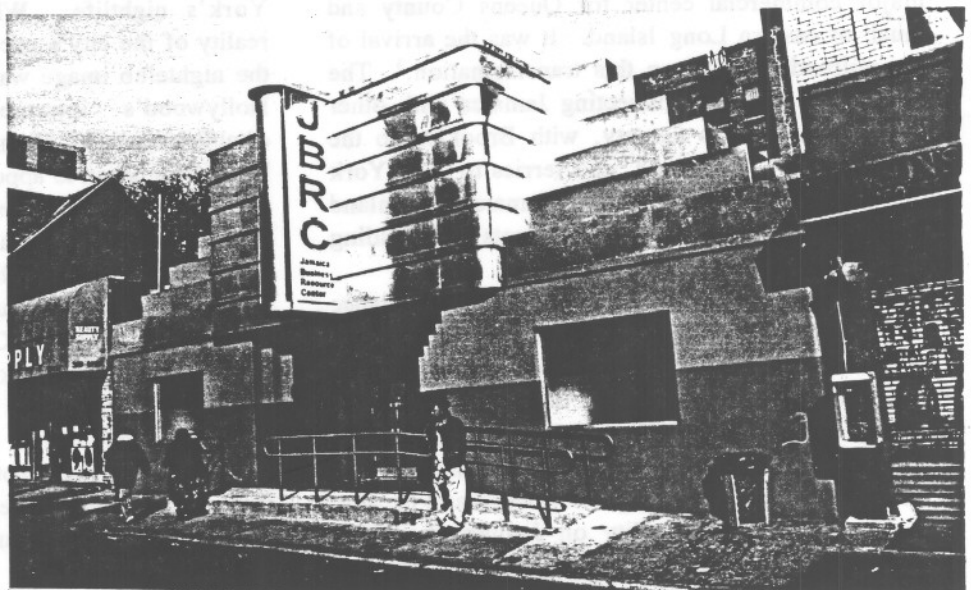
On November 21, 1995, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of La Casina, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six people, including a representative of the building's owner, the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation, spoke in favor of the designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received several letters and other expressions of support for this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary¹

La Casina is a rare surviving example of Streamlined Moderne design in New York City. The metal and stucco facade of this former nightclub and restaurant structure was constructed c. 1933, during the period of greatest popularity for the streamlined style. The building, erected in the heart of Jamaica's commercial center, is representative of the many entertainment facilities built in Jamaica

during the first decades of the twentieth century as this area developed into the commercial and entertainment hub for Queens County and nearby sections of Long Island. Although altered over the years, the La Casina Building has been beautifully restored and is again one of the most distinctive structures in Jamaica's business district.



Development of Jamaica²

Jamaica, one of the oldest settlements within the boundaries of New York City, developed into the leading commercial and entertainment center of Queens County. The Dutch purchased land in Jamaica from the Jameco (also spelled Jemeco) Indians in 1655. The following year, Governor Peter Stuyvesant granted a charter to the town, originally known as Rusdorp.

Following the transfer of power from the Dutch to the English in 1664, Rusdorp was renamed Jamaica, after the original Indian inhabitants of the region. Queens County (incorporating present-day Queens and Nassau Counties) was chartered in 1683. The English established Jamaica as the governmental center of Queens County, with a court, county clerk's office, and parish church (Grace Church; the present structure, dating from 1861-62, is a designated New York Landmark). Outside the town center, Jamaica was largely an area of farm fields and grazing land for cattle. The rural village was officially incorporated by New York State in 1814.

Jamaica's central location in Queens County and the extensive transportation network that developed in the town during the nineteenth century, resulted in the transformation of the community into the major commercial center for Queens County and much of eastern Long Island. It was the arrival of the railroads that began this transformation.³ The roads and rail lines connecting Jamaica with other sections of Queens County, with Brooklyn to the west, eastern Long Island, and ferries to New York City had a tremendous impact. Jamaica's farmland was soon being subdivided into streets and building lots, and new homes were erected.

By the turn of the century, Jamaica's importance as a commercial area became evident in the impressive buildings beginning to appear on Jamaica Avenue, most notably the Beaux-Arts Jamaica Savings Bank Building (Hough & Deuell, 1897-98), 161-02 Jamaica Avenue.⁴ After Jamaica was incorporated into the borough of Queens and became a part of New York City on January 1, 1898, additional transportation improvements brought increasing numbers of people.⁵ As a result, the population of Jamaica quadrupled between 1900 and 1920.

It was during the 1920s, when the major mass transit links were in place, and during a period when private automobile ownership was growing at an

extraordinary rate, that Jamaica experienced its major expansion as a commercial and entertainment center.⁶ By 1925, Jamaica Avenue between 160th Street and 168th Street had the highest assessed valuation in Queens County.⁷

During the 1920s and early 1930s, many small-scale commercial buildings were erected in Jamaica, as well as several major office and commercial structures, including the Jamaica Chamber of Commerce Building (George W. Conable, 1928-29) on 161st Street; the Title Guarantee Company Building (Dennison & Hiron, 1929), 90-04 161st Street; and the J. Kurtz & Sons Store (Allmendinger & Schlendorf, 1931; a designated New York City Landmark) on Jamaica Avenue. In addition, Jamaica developed into a significant entertainment center. By the mid-1930s, there were at least eight movie theaters on or just off of Jamaica Avenue, and there were over sixty restaurants, bars, and clubs, ranging from small ethnic taverns to elegant restaurants.⁸ It was within this bustling commercial and entertainment setting that La Casina opened.

The Nightclub:

A Brief Examination of Its History and Design

During the late 1920s and 1930s, the nightclub became a prominent and romantic symbol of New York's nightlife. While partially based on the reality of the city's exclusive clubs and restaurants, the nightclub image was largely a fantasy based on Hollywood's interpretation of these elegant establishments.⁹ Nightclubs and restaurants with live shows began to appear in New York City in the late 1920s as the enforcement of Prohibition ebbed.¹⁰ With the end of Prohibition in 1933, nightclubs proliferated.¹¹ As nightclubs and restaurants with live shows grew in popularity, their designs became increasingly elegant. Clubs and related restaurants such as the Central Park Casino, the Persian Room, the Rainbow Room, El Morocco, the 21 Club, and the Stork, catered to an exclusive clientele.¹² While most New Yorkers could not afford to patronize these establishments, they were well known through newspaper gossip columns, magazines, and other popular media outlets.

Movies such as *Broadway* (1929), *Puttin' on the Ritz* (1930), *Gold Diggers of 1935* (1935), *Broadway Melody of 1936* (1935), and *Swing Time* (1936) created a romantic image of nightclubs with Moderne and Art Deco decor incorporating streamlined walls and ceilings, glistening mirrored

floors, and elegantly appointed revelers. Perhaps in homage to popular Latin dances, many of these clubs, both real and cinematic, were given Spanish-sounding names.

Although modest in scale, La Casina was designed to fit the image of the up-to-date night spot. The club and restaurant was provided with a Latin name and its streamlined design echoes, in miniature, the elegant clubs enjoyed vicariously by patrons as they viewed movies at their local movie palaces.

La Casina: The Site and the Design of the Building

La Casina is located on 160th Street between Jamaica Avenue and 90th Avenue. Located only a few blocks from the center of Jamaica, 160th Street was initially developed with modest frame buildings, most erected as residences but later converted for commercial use. In 1907, the Queens Borough Real Estate Exchange erected a neo-Classical style brick and limestone office building designed by Tuthill & Higgins at 90-33 160th Street.¹³ The building was purchased in 1918 by Arnold Behrer, Jr., and Clarence Behrer. On November 1, 1932, the Behrers leased the site to Bernard Levy and La Casino, Inc., for a period of four years (until 1936). According to the lease agreement, the building was "to be used and occupied only as a restaurant, cabaret, beer garden, casino and dance hall."¹⁴ The rent rose from \$1,800 a year the first year to \$3,000 during the fourth year. All alterations made to the building by the lessee had to be approved by the owner.

The La Casino Supper Club opened in 1933. It first appeared in the Queens telephone directory for winter 1933-34. Apparently, the club was only open for a short time since it did not appear in the telephone directory for winter 1934-35. The club reopened by May 1936. Telephone directory listings continued to call the establishment the La Casino Restaurant. However, the weekly *La Casina Journal*, published by the establishment, spelled the name with an "a" and also referred to the La Casina Restaurant and Supper Club in its text.¹⁵ The work undertaken to create the present streamlined design was an alteration of the original building, but no surviving alteration application has been located that specifically notes the construction of a new front. Several permits for small alterations were issued in 1933, and one of these may have included the new facade.¹⁶

La Casina was designed in the Streamlined Moderne style which became popular in America in the 1930s.¹⁷ Although it initially appeared on residential buildings, the Streamlined Moderne style was soon adapted for commercial buildings since the dramatic massing and dynamic stripped forms drew attention and, therefore, brought people to the buildings. The style was popular for relatively small-scale public buildings, especially those that were erected for businesses that relied on a large paying clientele. These businesses included hotels, such as those in Miami Beach; theaters, such as the Pan Pacific Auditorium in Hollywood; movie theaters, notably those designed by S. Charles Lee; bus depots, such as the Greyhound Bus Terminal in Washington, D.C.; and roadside structures such as auto showrooms, motels, and diners.¹⁸ Historian Martin Greif characterized the Streamlined Moderne (also sometimes referred to as Depression Modern) as "an art stripped bare of all ornamentation. . . . Ideally, the Depression Modern style was spare . . . without a single detail that could be called extraneous, without any embellishment, without a line that did not seem inevitable."¹⁹

With its smooth planes of stucco, dynamic ziggurat massing, sweeping bands of metal, and its lack of applied ornamentation, the La Casina building fits Greif's description of the ideal streamlined structure. The streamlined mode was an appropriate choice for La Casina, not only providing an up-to-date image for the establishment, but also creating a noticeable form for the small midblock structure, one that would attract attention from busy Jamaica Avenue. This was heightened by the use of a bright projecting vertical neon sign announcing the nightclub's presence.

La Casina: The Restaurant and Nightclub

La Casina offered dining, dancing, and entertainment. According to the *La Casina Journal*, La Casina offered three shows a night performed by the La Casina Adorables and the La Casina Swing Melo-Dears. The club also featured special guests such as Maureen Rio, the Broadway star of Earl Carroll's *Sketch Book*.²⁰ There was no cover charge and the club offered free parking. The *Journal* noted such special events as "Celebrity Night"; "Democratic Night" and "Republican Night" (at the latter two evenings guests were to meet primary candidates); and "Bowery Night," where guests were to dress in old clothes, men were to arrive

unshaven, and all were to be entertained by Diamond L'il, Cuspidor Carrie, Fishface Fanny, Gashouse Gertie, Willie the Gonof, Little Annie Rooney, Champagne Lil, and Limehouse Lou.

Later History

La Casina (or a facility with a similar name) occupied the building until about 1938; the last entry in the telephone directory is for winter 1937-38.²¹ In 1940, Arnold Behrer, Jr., lost the property in a legal proceeding to the mortgagor, the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. A tax photograph taken by New York City in 1940 shows "For Rent" signs in the picture windows of the club. In 1942, the building was sold to the Church of God of Greater New York, Inc., although it does not appear to have ever been used as a church (the Church of God was headquartered on 224th Street). The use, if any, of the building in the early 1940s is not known.

In 1946, the former nightclub was sold to Polly Foundations, Inc., which converted the building into a factory that manufactured Ladyform bras. In 1952, the building was purchased by the Ellen Howard Corporation which manufactured Roxanne swim suits in the building until c.1987.

At some point, probably in the 1960s or 1970s, the galvanized-iron cladding of the ziggurat was covered in aluminum siding. The building was vacated in the late 1980s and deteriorated. In 1989, the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation acquired the former home of La Casina. A restoration was undertaken in 1994-95 under the guidance of the architectural firm of Li-Saltzman.²² The restoration entailed the removal of the aluminum siding, the replacement of the deteriorated galvanized iron with aluminum that matched the form of the original, the restoration of the stucco at the lower level to its original colors, the removal of historically and stylistically inappropriate glass block windows and their replacement with historically accurate plate-glass windows, and the restoration of the tile flanking the entrance and of the original doors and glass entrance surround. The original vertical sign was conserved and encased within a new sign. The building now houses the Jamaica Business Resource Center.

Description

La Casina is a one-story symmetrical structure with a two-tiered streamlined facade in the form of a stepped pyramid or ziggurat. The base of the pyramid is set parallel to the sidewalk. This section of the building is faced with stucco. The stuccoed portion of the facade is divided into a lower section that is painted gray and an upper section painted coral (paint studies determined the historical accuracy of these colors). The base is punctuated by a central entrance that is set back from the sidewalk within a five-stepped enframing clad in glazed black tiles at the lower section; the upper section is coral-colored stucco. The entrance contains its original wood and glass double doors with very large vertically-placed bronze handles supported by silver-metal upper and lower stepped brackets. The doors are set within a frame of opaque black glass. The entrance bay is flanked by rectangular windows. During the restoration, glass blocks that were crudely installed, probably when the building became a factory in the 1940s, were removed and replaced with historically accurate undivided plate glass. In addition, a shallow ramp for handicapped access has been added in front of the building.

Directly above the entrance is a curving streamlined frontispiece. It is divided into six wide horizontal bands with seven raised narrower bands covering the joints. To either side of this frontispiece is a six-layer stepped ziggurat. The frontispiece and flanking ziggurats were originally clad in smooth galvanized sheet metal attached to a wooden frame. The metal may originally have been painted gray. During the restoration, the deteriorated galvanized metal was replaced with shiny bands of aluminum.

Attached to the Building is the original vertical neon sign. This sign, which retains the words "La Casina" (an "o" for "casino" overlaps the "a"), "Ladyform Bras," "Swim Suits," and "Roxanne Swim Suits," has been encased in a new aluminum sleeve with the "JBRC" initials of the Jamaica Business Resource Center in neon.

Report prepared by
Andrew S. Dolkart
Landmarks Consultant

NOTES

1. Much of this report is based on "La Casina National Register Nomination" prepared by Andrew S. Dolkart (1989).
2. This section is based on H.W. Munsell, *The History of Queens County, New York* (New York: H.W. Munsell & Co., 1882); *Jamaica, Hempstead, Richmond Hill, Morris Park, and Woodhaven: Their Representative Men and Points of Interest* (New York: Mercantile Illustration Co., 1894); Henry Isham Hazelton, *The Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens Counties of Nassau and Suffolk Long Island, New York 1609-1924*, vol. 2 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1925); Theodore H.M. Prudon, ed., "Jamaica, Queens County, New York: Aspects of its History," unpublished typescript prepared for Columbia University Graduate Program for Restoration and Preservation of Historic Architecture (1975); New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Former J. Kurtz & Sons Store Building Designation Report*, LP-1132, report prepared by Virginia Kurshan (New York: City of New York, 1981); John A. Peterson, ed., *A Research Guide to the History of the Borough of Queens* (Queens: Queens College, Department of History, 1987); Vincent F. Seyfried and William Asadorian, *Old Queens, N.Y. in Early Photographs* (New York: Dover, 1991); New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *(Former) Jamaica Savings Bank Designation Report*, LP-1800, report prepared by Elisa Urbanelli (New York: City of New York, 1992).
3. In the early nineteenth century, the King's Highway, which led from Brooklyn to Queens along the route of an Indian trail, had become a toll road, known as the Brooklyn, Jamaica & Flatbush Turnpike. In 1832, the Brooklyn and Jamaica Railroad Company was established. It purchased the turnpike and began construction on a rail line. Two years later the Long Island Railroad (LIRR) was founded. It leased the Brooklyn and Jamaica's right of way, inaugurating service between Jamaica and a ferry at the foot of Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn in 1836; the line was extended eastward to Hicksville a year later. The opening of the initial Long Island Railroad line through Jamaica established the village as a transportation hub, but other developments increased Jamaica's importance. In 1850, Jamaica Avenue was converted into a plank road by the Jamaica & Brooklyn Plank Road Company, thus improving road transportation between the Fulton Ferry and Queens County. Horsecar lines began operation on the avenue in 1866 when the East New York & Jamaica Railroad Company inaugurated service; the horsecars were replaced by electric trolleys in the mid-1880s. In 1860, the Long Island Railroad began service from a ferry landing at Hunter's Point to Jamaica, and in 1869 a rival railroad company, the South Side Railroad, began service between Jamaica and Patchogue. For a schematic history of the Long Island Railroad see "Chronology of the Long Island Rail Road" in Peterson, 27-28. For more detailed information see, Carl W. Condit, *Port of New York*, 2 vol. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) and Vincent Seyfried, *The Long Island Rail Road: A Comprehensive History*, 7 vol. (1961-1975).
4. The Jamaica Savings Bank Building was designated as a New York City Landmark in 1974, but the designation was subsequently denied by the Board of Estimate. The building was again designated a Landmark in 1992, but this designation was denied by the City Council.
5. These improvements included the widening and repaving of Jamaica Avenue (known as Fulton Street until about 1918) in 1898; the electrification of the Long Island Railroad in 1905-08; the opening of the Queensborough Bridge in 1909; the completion of the LIRR's tunnel beneath the East River in 1910 (the bridge and tunnel obviated the need for ferries, thus cutting commuting time to and from Long Island and Manhattan); and the completion of the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company's elevated railroad on Jamaica Avenue in 1918.
6. There were more than eight million cars in America by 1920; see Chester Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1985), 17.

7. Seyfried and Asadorian, 26. The importance of Jamaica's geographic location and the development of the area as a transportation and commercial hub were recognized in the *WPA Guide to New York City*: "Jamaica, the community around Jamaica Avenue and Parsons Boulevard [one block west of the site of La Casina], is the geographical center of Queens. Most of the important Brooklyn and Queens highways that lead to Nassau County and eastern Long Island pass through Jamaica. It is the terminus of the BMT and Independent subways and the principal transfer station of the Long Island Railroad. Along the main thoroughfare, Jamaica Avenue, there has evolved as comprehensive suburban shopping center." *The WPA Guide to New York City* (NY: Random House, 1939; reprinted NY: Pantheon, 1982), 583.
8. The theaters were the Alden, Carlton, Jamaica, Linden, Loew's Hillside, Loew's Valencia, Merrick, Plaza, and Savoy. The only one of these to survive relatively intact is the Loew's Valencia (John Eberson, 1929), one of the finest movie palaces in New York City. It is now the Tabernacle of Prayer. Information on theaters and restaurants from *Queens Classified Telephone Directory* (1933-1936).
9. The Hollywood image of the nightclub is discussed in Donald Albrecht, *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row and the Museum of Modern Art, 1986), 132-138, and Howard Mandelbaum and Eric Myers, *Screen Deco: A Celebration of High Style in Hollywood* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 101-120.
10. Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 287.
11. As noted in an article written only a few months after repeal, "night life has come out into the open. It is right back to being a public spectacle instead of a secret rite." H.I. Brock, "Now Our Night Life Glows Anew," *New York Times Magazine*, February 11, 1934, pp. 10-11 (quoted in Stern et al, 288).
12. Several nightclubs of the 1930s, including the Central Park Casino, Rainbow Room, and Persian Room are discussed and illustrated in Stern et al, 280-291.
13. New Building Permit 489-1907. Tuthill & Higgins was a Jamaica-based architectural firm which had been established in 1897 by Cuyler B. Tuthill and John B. Higgins. Prior to 1900 the firm had designed the Jamaica Emergency Hospital and the Jamaica South School, as well as the Interstate Casino. See Dennis S. Francis, *Architects in Practice New York City 1840-1900* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1980), 101. The firm designed a two-story extension (1902) to the apse of the nearby First Reformed Church of Jamaica, 153-10 Jamaica Avenue.
14. Queens County, Office of the Register, Deed and Conveyance Records, Liber 3670, page 30714, October 4, 1933.
15. One issue of *La Casina Journal*, dated August 13, 1936 (volume 1, number 9) survives. It is not known how many issues were published. The four-page publication is in the collection of the Queens History Division of the Queensborough Public Library in Jamaica.
16. In 1933, three applications for alterations were submitted to the Queens Buildings Dept.: Alt. 1531-1933 (plumbing at estimated cost of \$2000); Alt. 8651-1933 (store at estimated cost of \$150); and Alt. 8822-1933 (unknown at estimated cost of \$500). An additional plumbing application was submitted in 1936 (Alt. 1586-1936; estimated cost \$200). However, the costs listed for all of these seem too low to have included a new facade. Alteration "Docket Books" were examined for the years 1932-1936. Sections of several of these docket books are seriously deteriorated, and some entries are missing or illegible.
17. For the Streamlined Moderne, see Donald J. Bush, *The Streamlined Decade* (New York: George Braziller, 1975); Martin Greif, *Depression Modern: The Thirties Style in America* (New York: Universe Books, 1975); Liebs, 55-58; Richard Guy Wilson, "Architecture in the Machine Age," in *The Machine Age in America*

1918-1941 (New York: The Brooklyn Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 149-203. Wilson, 174, has noted that "the major impetus for architectural streamlining came in the early 1930s when Norman Bel Geddes published his House of Tomorrow or House #3 first in the *Ladies Home Journal* and then in *Horizons*." The publication of this house in mass market journals served to popularize the style.

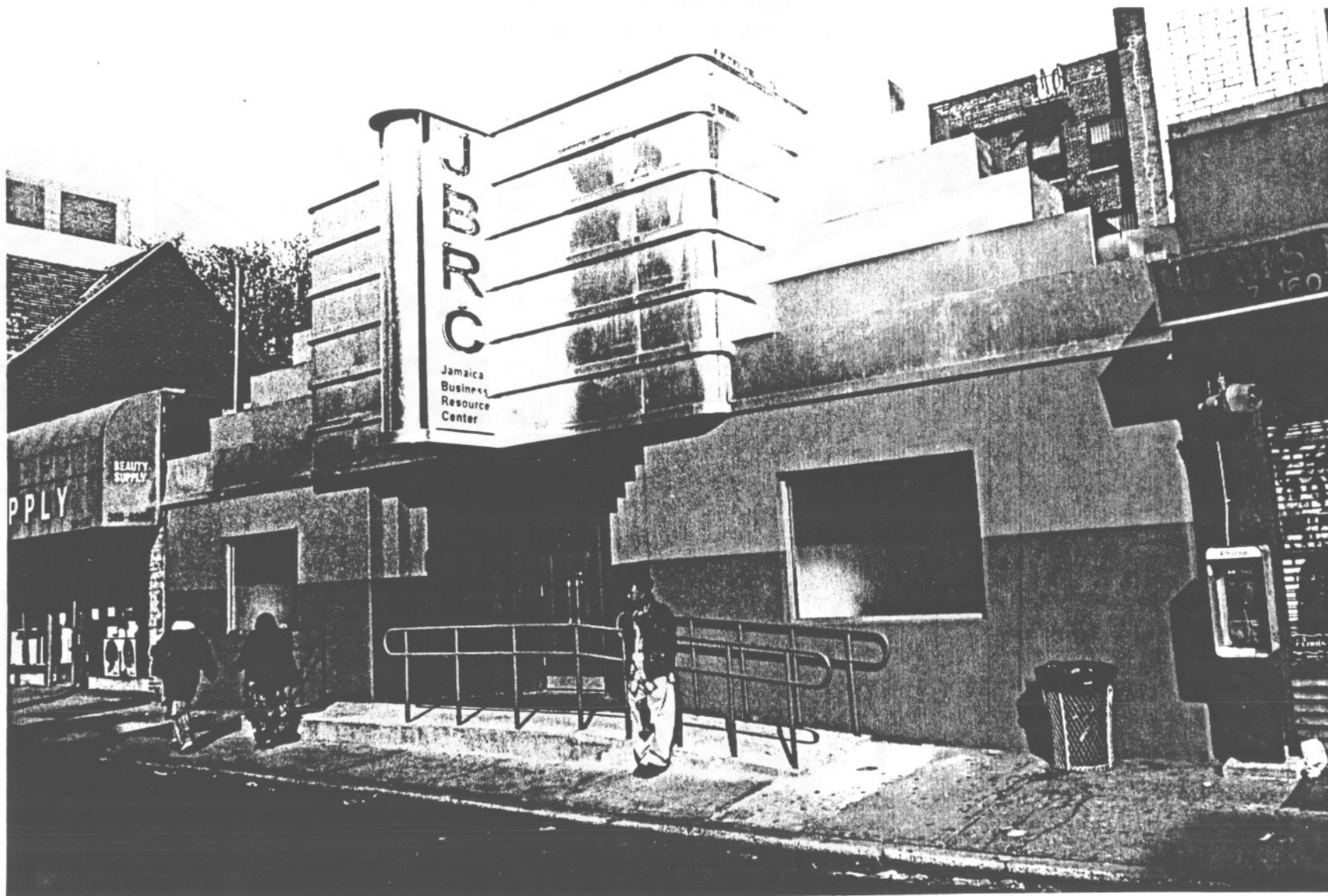
18. For Miami Beach hotels, see Laura Cerwinske, *Tropical Deco: The Architecture and Design of Old Miami Beach* (New York: Rizzoli, 1981). For the Pan Pacific Auditorium, see Wilson, 176-177. For movie theaters, see Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981); and David Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters* (Washington: Preservation Press, 1987). For the Greyhound Bus terminal in Washington, see Hans Wirz and Richard Striner, *Washington Deco* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 179-180, and Pamela Scott and Antoinette J. Lee, *Buildings of the District of Columbia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 195. For roadside buildings see Liebs.
19. Greif, 31.
20. *La Casina Journal* 1 (August 13, 1936).
21. A tax photograph from 1940 shows the vertical sign with the word "Jamaica" placed above "Casina"; the "La" had been removed. A sign in the window also refers to "Jamaica Casina." There are no telephone directory entries for Jamaica Casina.
22. Information on conditions prior to restoration and on the restoration itself are in Li-Saltzman, "La Casina: Existing Conditions Survey & Preliminary Plans/Outline Specifications," (1990).

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 La Casina has a special character and special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

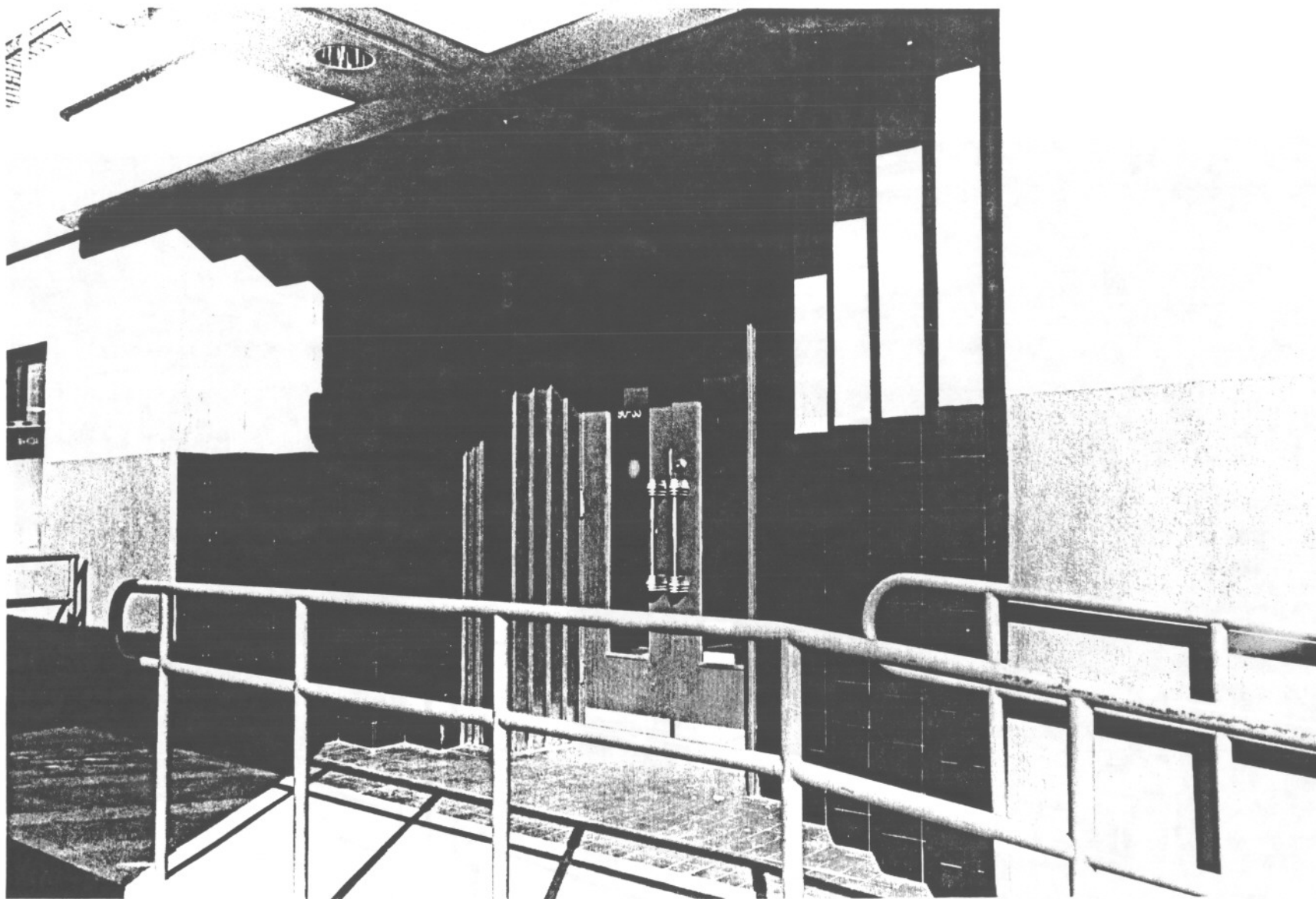
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, La Casina is significant as a rare example in New York City of a building designed in the Streamlined Moderne style; that it is a key commercial building in Jamaica; that it is a representative example of the many entertainment facilities erected in Jamaica at the time when this area was the commercial and entertainment center of Queens County; and that although altered over the years, La Casina has been beautifully restored and is again one of the most distinctive structures in Jamaica's business district.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark La Casina, also known as La Casino, now the Jamaica Business Resource Center, 90-33 160th Street, Jamaica, Queens, and designates Tax Map Block 9757, Lot 8, as its Landmark Site.



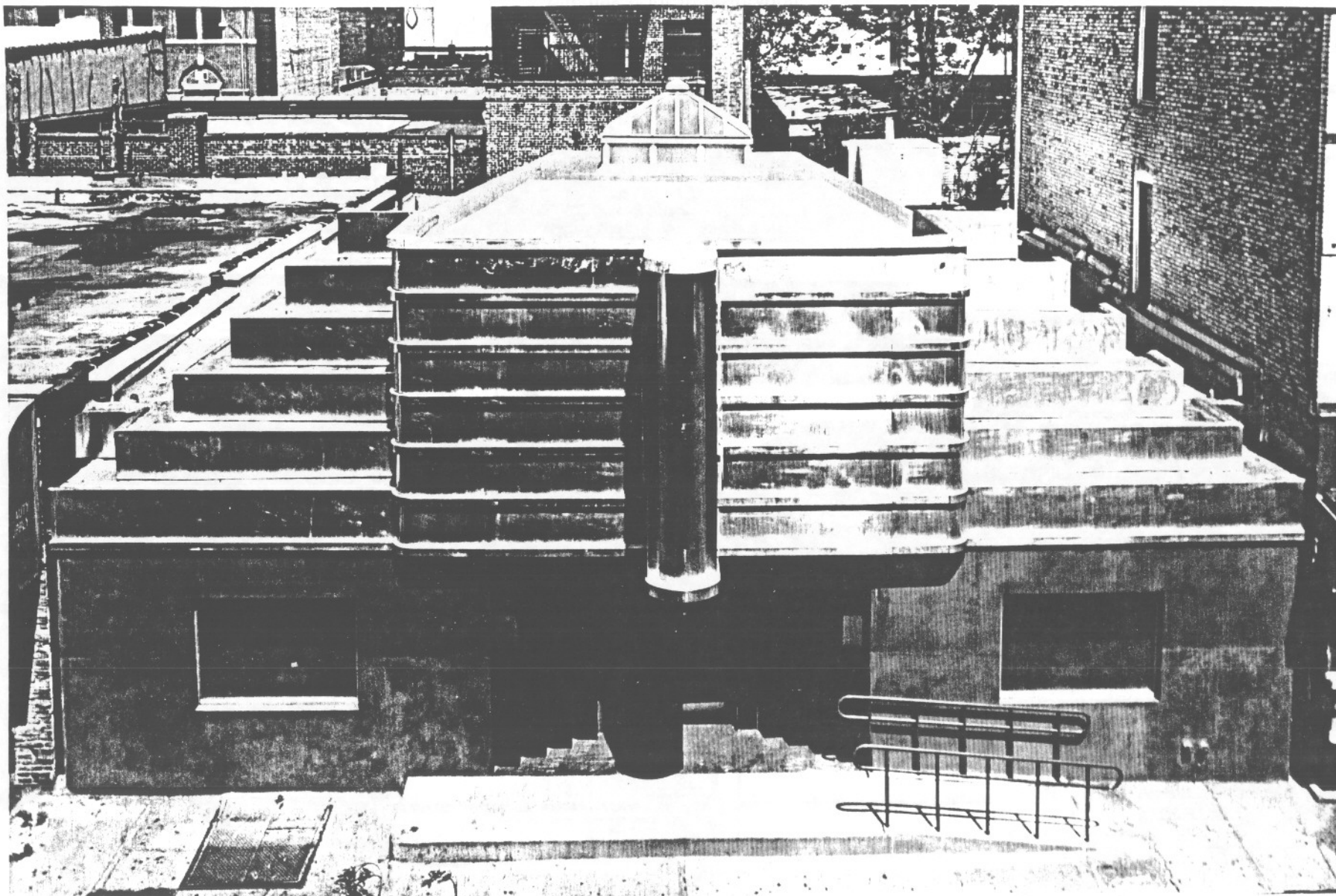
La Casina, 90-33 160th Street, Jamaica, Queens.
160th Street Facade

Photo: Carl Forster, Nov. 1995



La Casina, 90-33 160th Street, Jamaica, Queens.
Detail of main entrance on 160th Street

Photo: Carl Forster, Nov. 1995



La Casina, 90-33 160th Street, Jamaica, Queens.
Building from west side of 160th Street

Photo: Courtesy of Greater Jamaica Development Corp., c. 1995



La Casina, 90-33 160th Street, Jamaica, Queens.
Building prior to restoration

Photo: Courtesy of Greater Jamaica Development Corp., c. 1985

