



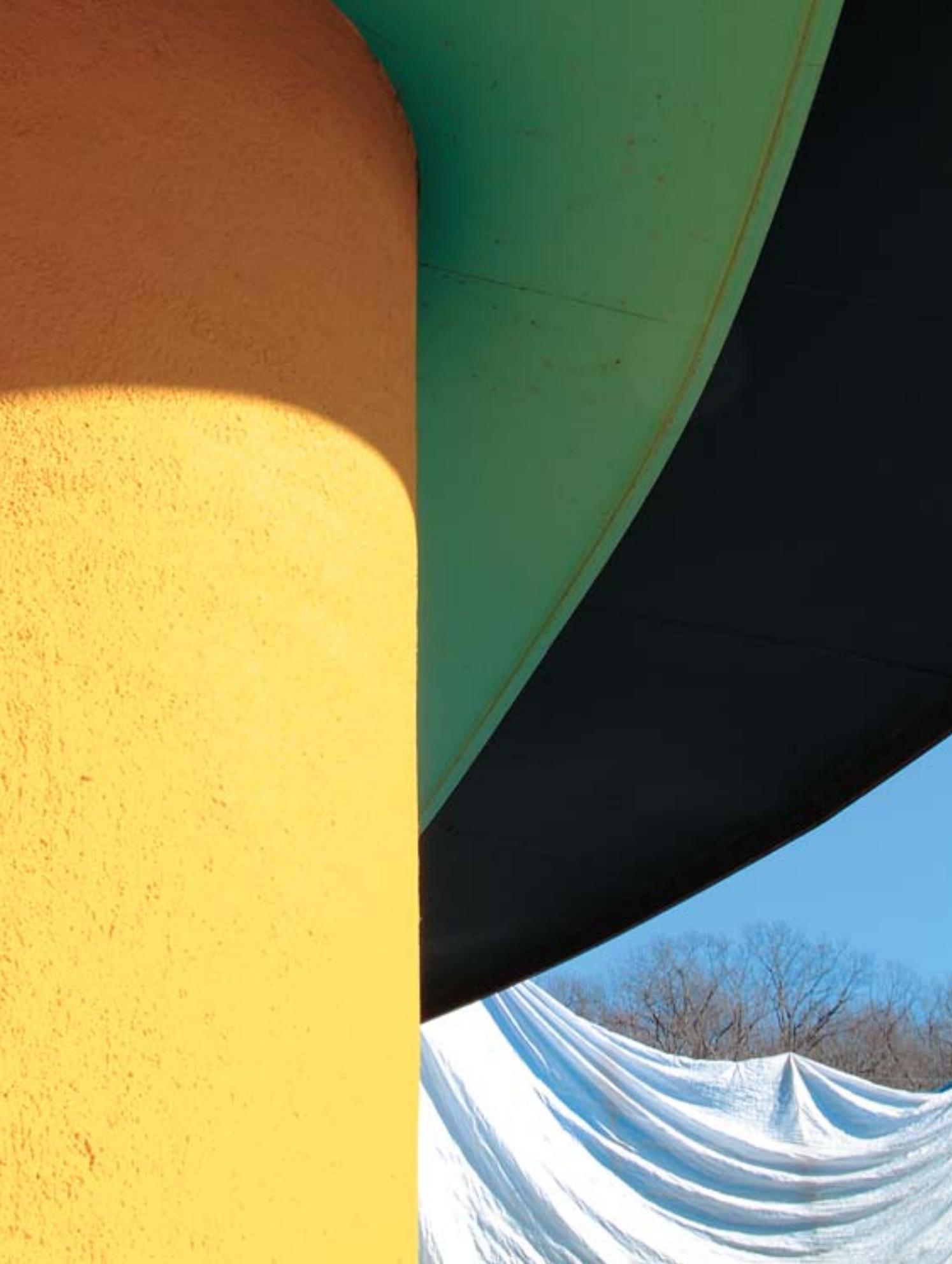
# POOL

## O F M E M O R I E S

PROBING THE RECENT PAST AT MARYLAND'S GLEN ECHO PARK WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID ANDREWS

**“Sorry kid, can’t let you in,” the counselor said, fixing his glance on the fresh scar over my eye,** still evident today under a graying brow. This wintry morning, one scarred facade stares down another as I point a lens at the pool’s flaking entrance, and it points right back. Memories rush up from the deep, summoned by the moment. ¶ I served out my boyhood where Washington’s East Capitol Street—a leafy byway at the root—blossomed into a brutal swath of concrete sprawl, arrested at the border by trees and tin-roof relics like ours. One side was black, the other white, and trespass rare—a jolt after living in one of the city’s few integrated neighborhoods. ¶ The nation was going from a decade that denied differences to one that embraced them. For a Catholic schoolboy, duded up in starched shirt and monogrammed tie, getting around was often an exercise in eluding the local punks. One day I failed the exercise, and the counselor, taking measure of the evidence, quashed my dream of a day in the Crystal Pool.

**Left, above: The park’s entrance, ablaze in neon, framing the front of the pool. “A rapidly whizzing trolley-car can stir a breeze in the stillest night of midsummer,” wrote one author about the mechanized thrills and fantasies sprouting around cities of the early 20th century. “The need for some place where one could alight and thus vary the monotony led to the inception of the park scheme.”**



**IT WAS THE GREEK GOD OF SWIMMING VENUES, THE LOVE CHILD OF** Hercules and Aphrodite swaddled in Art Deco grandeur. There was a quarter-acre beach, a reviewing stand, two low boards, one high, a fountain, an island, and not one but three pools, where thousands of water worshippers could lap up the day, and often did. The exclamation point was a sky-high slide. As evening descended along the Potomac, the place became a Busby Berkeley tableau, alight with underwater incandescence. “It could be separated from Glen Echo park and still be magnificent,” one visitor recalls in the film that airs at the site.

As the other campers jostled by me, through the turnstiles, past the maze of plumbing, past the ice-cold water jets, and on to gulp down a day of pleasure, I could smell the chlorine and the sun-tan oil, hear the glee refracted by the sapphire surface float up over the park and into the glorious oak canopy. I did find a substitute for the fun in the sun, growing intoxicated with triple helpings of the Tilt-a-Whirl, the Satellite Jet, the Hall of Mirrors, and some of the premier amusements on the planet. On this frosty winter morning, with the wind whipping from across the Potomac, the moment still hangs in the air.

My grandparents take the rap, getting me into Catholic school and camp. Summering with clergy was not my idea of a good time; the hook was the field trip. Today, I stand next to the lifeguard station, perched high above the Potomac. The pool is filled in, weeds crawling up the walls. Most of the rides are history. But the outline survives, and so does the magic. The park sits on a high plateau, a gentle pause where the river meets the Blue Ridge foothills. Below, cascading whitecaps rush toward the city. “The real story was not just what to do with the 16 acres here,” says Sam Swersky, a National Park Service ranger who gives me a tour-de-force tour. “The story goes back even earlier to what to do with the Potomac. There were serious proposals to pave over the C & O Canal, make it a connecting road to the interstate.” The environmental movement came to the fore around the same time that Glen Echo hit the skids. “The amusement parks, on the outskirts of

cities, became prime real estate,” Sam says. “So where you had declining profits in amusements, you had soaring opportunities in apartments and shopping centers and housing tracts. At the same time, lakes and rivers were being described as dead in the media. The fear was that if something wasn’t done, you’d have a cesspool flowing by the Washington Monument.” The locals didn’t want apartments crawling up the hills, either. They found a sympathetic ear in Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, and the park owners agreed to swap with GSA for a downtown site. In a month, the citizens raised



RICHARD A. COOK COLLECTION



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**Left: All that's left of the Cuddle Up is its streamline skeleton, an essay in Art Deco. Above: Earth Day and hedonism head to head—swell swimming flanks a “yurt,” inspired by the movable abodes of Mongolian nomads, made of animal skins and carpets. The structure and its siblings—intended for the Mall in the early '70s at an expo called “Humanisphere”—found a home at the park when the event fell through. Today they host art classes.**

\$80,000, reeling back the purchase of the carousel from a California collector. From there, the place evolved into a national park, melding the past with puppet shows and art exhibits and ballroom dances and more, the carousel restored to its original magnificence. But perhaps the prime use is less tangible. “People come to me to check their memories,” says Sam. “As you grow up, the concerns of the world lay on you. People yearn for a time when they were with family or friends. What’s left is the place, etched in their minds. They might not remember years of work, but they’ll remember one afternoon.”



**THE PLACE OZZED ROMANCE, RIGHT FROM THE GET-GO. GLEN ECHO STARTED** as a retreat for the Chautauqua movement, which aimed to spread culture from the well-to-do to the masses. There were prayer vigils and lawn tennis, songs and storytelling. Sunday was set aside for religious observance. There were also campfires sure to ignite the unapproved spark, and twisty-turny paths ideal for a rendezvous, lit by small colored lights with cedar signs extolling nature's beauty. The Chautauqua chancellor imposed a curfew, but it met with small success, his own daughter a reported multiple violator.

The 1920s brought the vote and social freedom for women, both sexes done to the nines in pictures from the period. Questing for a kewpie doll, a sheer-sleeved flapper hoists a .22. The park was a swinging hot spot, with a Tunnel of Love and the new coast-to-coast craze, the Caterpillar.

"Here was the little car, barely wide enough for two," Sam says. "You have to be pretty friendly with someone just to get in. Then it takes off, undulating round and round until it hits peak velocity. A canvas cover descends over you and your sweetheart, and you're careening at breakneck speed, pushed next to each other, *in the dark*. This is an era when couples not only dressed formally, they acted formally, regardless of their emotions. You have to believe we haven't changed much in 80 years. The park gave you a little license to do what's natural!"

Flash forward three decades and it's lights, camera, libido on the Milt Grant Dance Show, live from Glen Echo Amusement Park. Pompadoured or page-boyed, stag or drag, you came to gyrate. One

**Right, below: Images of the carousel flank a 1960 faceoff—** a Glen Echo guard and Howard University med student Marvous Saunders. Lawrence Henry, a divinity student at the school, led the drive to desegregate. "Can I ask your race?" a guard asked him. "I belong to the human race," he replied. Two months of protests—with George Lincoln Rockwell's Nazi Party turning out to back the park—forced integration. "The racial ugliness that surrounded the desegregation really took away a lot of the fantasies," a former lifeguard recalls in the film that airs at the site. "I saw people that I know cheer when George Lincoln Rockwell showed up. That was really hard for me to understand." At a reunion of picketers last year, Tina Clarke—then a teenager protesting with a contingent from the NAACP—said her cheek still feels the sting of a heckler's spit. For others, it was too painful to return.



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performer's swimsuit went opaque as she emerged lip-syncing from the pool, to the delight of cameramen. "The park set the stage for a memorable experience, creating a desire to come back," Sam says.

It all started with the streetcar. "The ride was as much fun as the park—until you got to the park," a visitor recalls in the film.

Drivers went pedal to the metal as soon as they hit a private right of way outside Georgetown, whizzing through an instant countryside of horses and geese and pigs and sheep, a fairy tale of chasm-leaping trestles along a wooded shelf precipitously peering down on the river.

The trolley company—proprietor of the park—is the key to the history. "Admission was free, but you were already a customer when you hopped on the car," Sam says. "It was a national phenomenon. From coast to coast, north to south, east to west, every city had a park. The proof is on eBay. Plug in 'amusement park' and 'postcard.' Every day you'll get 200 to 400 hits."

It was a paragon of pleasure, just a streetcar ride away. Smiling girls and sailors, lashing a wooden horse. A metal lady, laughing maniacally. Sno-cone bombardiers, joysticking a flying scooter. Quadruple dips of danger, hair slicked into a Fonze.

"At the top of the big drop, the macho-type guys would always want to show off," one visitor says in the park film. "So they would stand up as the thing was in descent. I always thought it was like putting your life on the line." Glen Echo saw its first fatality in 1918.

When brazen patrons took the fall, a park could be damaged by publicity or done in by legal settlement. Still, there was no stopping the headlong rush for faster and scarier—cars that zigzagged or switch-





backed, cars that jumped gaps, cars that raced. New rides replaced them as fast as they were built. Coasters got higher climbs, deeper dips, with names like Cyclone Racer, Tornado, Mr. Twister, and Shooting Star. Chicago's Riverview Park boasted seven of them. The coaster became the billboard, the outward sign of a new visual signature. Willard Scott—weatherman for the *Today Show* and a native Washingtonian—recalls in the park film: “As a kid I used to go over to the corner store, eat 25 Twinkies and gulp two big 16 ounce RC Colas, then ride the coaster. You can imagine what happened after the third or fourth trip.”

Sam says, “You put in a new coaster, it paid for itself in a couple years, then ran for decades at a profit. There was no scrimping. You got the best you can get.” At Glen Echo, the carousel animals were hand carved out of wood, the mirror frames—a delicacy in plaster—all molded, gilded, and painted by hand. “They did that to make an impression on you,” Sam says. “And it worked.”

The 1920s were the golden years, but most parks went under with the Depression. Glen Echo's heyday followed the fortunes of the city, whose population exploded with the New Deal and WW II. Patrons wanted rides they could control, like gas-powered motorboats and the Flying Scooter, whose hinged rudder let riders “dive” towards the ground, an amusement park first.

A million people came through the turnstiles in 1942. By 1953, attendance was so high ticket sales had to be centralized. Workweeks were shorter, weekends longer. “Glen Echo was *the* social spot to be,” Sam says. “If you were white.”

**Opposite, below left and center: The popcorn palace recalls the elixir of a summer day—frothy cones of cotton candy, hot dogs and soda held aloft on the coaster, and the metallic blare of the carousel, mirrored lower left. The restoration of the park's signage, a superb sampling of Moderne style, arose when the starstruck instructor of a neon workshop, attended by a ranger wanting to repair a letter, helped get local companies to donate \$30,000 in materials and labor. Below right: Stewardesses hold on to their hats.**

clubbed, kicked, chained, and high-pressure hosed, all on TV. At Glen Echo, a Howard University divinity student saw the chance to break the back of segregation in the largely white county. So commenced two months of picketing—bolstered by the nearby residents of Bannockburn, a predominately Jewish community. Attendance took a hit, and finally the park's hard-line managers gave in.

“A lot of racial tension remained,” Sam says. A host of private swim clubs sprouted up in the area; a park riot, in 1966, signaled the end. “One of the main causes was the way the African American customers felt they were treated—they weren't going to stand for it,” says Sam. “That turned the park into a ghost town.”



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**ONE SUMMER MORNING IN 1963, PARABLE AND PROPHECY**—THE CIVIL RIGHTS anthem “Blowin’ in the Wind”—floated out of my counselor’s car radio and into the backseat, interrupting my reverie. It was the end of childhood, the end of an era. A new catechism promised change. The priests and the nuns, essence of uncool, became heroes overnight, marching on the Mall with Martin Luther King, Jr.

The country was pressure-cooked out of a somnolent decade. All through the South, freedom riders stood up—and were promptly

**LAST SPRING, PLACES OF PLAY AS PLACES OF MEMORY GOT THE SPOTLIGHT** AT a conference cosponsored by the National Park Service. “I wasn’t aware of all the places that people take for granted—until they become landmarks,” says Andy Quinn, an attendee whose family still runs Pittsburgh’s century-old Kennywood Amusement Park, itself a national historic landmark. “And tearing them down doesn’t mean something better is going up.” Says Sam Swersky, “When Glen Echo was acquired in 1970, the idea of appreciating places like this wasn’t even on the radar

screen. Today, when you enter the ballroom, you enter another era. You're an active participant in what was important 80 years ago." During the 1990s, the dancers themselves—some of whom met their spouses here—rose to oppose the demolition of the structure, then being held together with band-aids. County executive Doug Duncan helped deliver \$20 million in county, state, and federal rehab funds. Today—on the same floor lit up by Tommy Dorsey and Bill Haley & the Comets—700 people come to Jitterbug and Lindy Hop.

Kennywood is giving it a go too, Andy says. "A lot of our rides are the one or two left. If you wanted to buy them now, you couldn't. They still appeal because generations have taken their kids on them. Outside our area we're viewed as a cool, old time park, which has a marketability in this cookie-cutter age. Ohio law says school field trips have to be educational. What better way to learn than to go to a national historic landmark." After a PBS documentary aired, he says, "people called from places like Los Angeles and Chicago saying your park reminds me of the one from my childhood. When we expanded, we copied the rides of 1900 to 1910 from old photographs."

Playland, an Art Deco delight on the shores of Long Island Sound, has "an astonishing level of integrity"—says Lisa Kolakowsky, a

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National Park Service historian and conference presenter—with "a turbo-fast merry-go-round, fast as lightning with the feeling of a roller coaster." The park, featured in the Tom Hanks movie *Big*, survives partly due to the continuity of generations and an owner, the local county, that embraces its status as a national historic landmark.

Still, what happens when the current generation goes? "Our country moves so fast," Sam says. "What makes money sticks around and is copied and what doesn't is quickly discarded and built over. If you're the private owner of a carousel, you're under constant pressure to cannibalize the pieces, sell them to an auction house, put fiberglass repros on the machine. Where do you put the money? You can't preserve every stick, you can't compete with Six Flags."

Out on Washington's southeast border, the life I knew is already a discard. A metro station took down our tin-roof cottage, once enveloped by a muscular stand of trees. East Capitol Street, all six lanes of it, gallops into the suburbs. The scene's defining structure, a brutish warren of apartments, is now an open field of furrowed clay.

**Above, right: Past meets present. "At a collector's day last year, people were in tears," says Ranger Sam Swersky about the emotions stirred by the site. "Everyone has their own story, but it strikes me how much the stories are the same. When I first started working here it was a little spooky. But now I think it's shared humanity coming through."**

