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**“SAVING” ICONIC PLACES:  
CONEY ISLAND’S WILD REDEVELOPMENT RIDE**

**By**

**JUAN JORGE RIVERO SOUSS**

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**Graduate Program in Planning and Public Policy**

**Written under the direction of**

**Robert W. Lake**

**And approved by**

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## I. Abstract

### ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Saving” Iconic Places: Coney Island’s Wild Redevelopment Ride

by JUAN JORGE RIVERO SOUSS

Dissertation Director:

Robert W. Lake

This dissertation examines the origins of a planning controversy over the redevelopment of Coney Island, a world-famous, historic, seaside amusement district in Brooklyn, New York. In 2009, the Bloomberg Administration passed a major rezoning of the neighborhood in an effort to attract development to the area. This measure inspired opposition from individuals who felt that the proposal did not honor the neighborhood’s history. My research focuses on the hegemonic rationality that shaped the City’s plan and on the competing logics and desires that inspired its opposition. Wide agreement about Coney Island’s heritage value and foremost attributes—its diversity, authenticity, and historicity—masked profound disagreement about the proper uses of the district and about the plans for its future.

To explore this disconnect, I trace it back to an interplay between divergent sets of images and experiences of the neighborhood, as mediated by its materiality, and then show how these divergences helped shape the planning process. Viewed through this lens, qualities like diversity and authenticity become not points of agreement, but windows for examining sources of contestation. They help us explain why neighborhood physical structures dismissed by the City as obsolete and disposable were regarded by others as useful and historic. In this way, my project points planning practice beyond the question of which places matter and toward questions of how and why they matter. This focus on subjective experience facilitates a deeper understanding of people's relation to places, making possible the formulation of more responsive and equitable plans. It also allows us to envision forms of conflict resolution based not on zero-sum adversarial trade-offs, which invariably favor the powerful, but on a negotiated reconceptualization of a place and of its future.

## **II. Acknowledgments**

I fell into this project backwards, and it took the support, advice, inspiration, and prodding of a wide range of people to see it to fruition. I would like to acknowledge their contributions at the outset.

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## V. Introduction

The Thunderbolt was one of three major roller coasters in the history of Coney Island, a historic amusement district in Brooklyn, New York. In fiction, it overhung the childhood home of Alvy Singer, in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*. In life, it overhung the home of the Moran family, which operated the ride during most of its existence between 1925 and 1982. During subsequent decades, the structure began to deteriorate. In 2000, the administration of then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani built a minor league baseball stadium in the lot next to Thunderbolt. Rumor had it that Giuliani felt that the roller coaster obstructed views from his new ballpark (Denson 2004, 177). Whatever the case, on November 17, at 6:00am, to prevent any last minute injunction by preservationists, Giuliani had demolition crews trespass illegally onto the property and demolish the ride, claiming that it presented a public hazard (Barry 2003).

A woman whom I'll call Jane moved to New York City after college in the 1980s and shortly thereafter became a Coney Island regular. She enjoyed taking pictures in the neighborhood of people, businesses, signs, and rides, making a point of documenting aspects of Coney Island that she felt were disappearing. On November 17th, the day of her birthday, she decided to celebrate by taking pictures of the Thunderbolt, which was missing from her portfolio. When she got there, she found the Thunderbolt in ruins. She searched for the large electric sign that had stood at the entrance to the ride. When she came upon it, though, she discovered that someone had taken care to smash all its bulbs—all but one. Jane

removed the remaining bulb, took it with her, and put it on display on her mantelpiece (interview with advocate, August 22, 2012).

This project deals with the types of differences that divided Jane and Giuliani. It asks how something can become, at once, one person's trash or eyesore and another's treasured historical artifact, and how this divide operates at the scale of an urban neighborhood. If Jane's affinity for this bulb had stemmed from personal idiosyncrasy, then the disagreement over the value of the bulb would have little bearing on matters of urban redevelopment. As it happens, however, Jane became part of a disparate group of individuals who, apparently motivated by similar preservationist impulses, mobilized to challenge a plan by the Bloomberg Administration to redevelop the neighborhood. This project seeks to understand this conflict. Through a case study of Coney Island, it describes how the meanings of a place are negotiated throughout the planning process and how they became a source of contention. In doing so, this project uncovers divergent ways of understanding a neighborhood and explains how this divergence leads to conflicting plans for its future. It elucidates people's complex attachments to Coney Island and the concrete practices that constitute the planning process, shedding light on the value of iconic places and on the controversial nature of their redevelopment.

Coney Island, at the turn of the 20th century, was one of the most innovative and popular amusement centers in the world—a place that saw the invention of dozens of amusement rides and attractions and that contributed to the emergence of a culture of collective recreation. Since that time, its popularity has waned, and many

of its innovations have been copied and superseded elsewhere. During the second half of the century, the number of amusements in the area shrank, leaving behind large tracts of vacant land. Although diminished, however, Coney Island remains a much-frequented place for recreation and a well-loved neighborhood that features prominently in New York City history and lore. Nonetheless, the persistence of underutilized buildings and lots has long challenged planners and city officials to find ways to restore some measure of Coney Island's former success.

In 2009, following a multi-year planning process, the Bloomberg administration<sup>1</sup> announced a plan for the redevelopment of Coney Island. The plan aimed to "save"<sup>2</sup> Coney Island by inducing large-scale private development through an extensive rezoning that would allow higher densities and less restrictive residential and commercial uses in the district. This planning approach hewed closely to a redevelopment template followed by the administration throughout the city. The plan for Coney Island, however, inspired opposition from people who held strong views of their own about Coney Island and who clamored for a departure from the City's script. The opponents who organized themselves under the name Save Coney Island (SCI) called for development that conformed to and enhanced Coney Island's historic function.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the public review of the plan, SCI's demands translated into requests for modifications that allocated more land to outdoor amusements. The administration neither met those demands nor managed to dispel the advocates' sense that the City's plan was a failure of imagination. Despite their differences, the competing redevelopment visions resembled each

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the study I also refer to the Bloomberg administration as the City.

<sup>2</sup> Seth Pinsky (President of New York City Economic Development Corporation), interview by Amy Nicholson, March 18, 2009. Unpublished transcript of raw footage for documentary film.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the study I also refer to members of SCI as the amusement advocates or simply as the advocates.

other in important regards. Both aimed to save Coney Island by revitalizing its amusement area, and both justified their plans by reference to Coney Island's iconic stature. Given these similarities, one might have expected a greater degree of agreement between the groups, especially since members of SCI welcomed the City's long absent interest in the neighborhood (interviews with advocates, September 7, 2012 and August 2, 2013). Nonetheless, SCI's objections proved enough to provoke dozens of protests and petition drives, as well as a lawsuit seeking to overturn the legislative approval of the City's plan.

My research explains the conflict between the City and SCI by examining the origins of their views of Coney Island and of their visions for the redevelopment of the neighborhood. I organize my investigation around Coney Island's iconic identity or iconicity, an attribute that foregrounded competing understandings of the neighborhood. Iconicity refers to an intense and widely shared belief in an essential identity. Like all spatial identities, iconicity both shapes and is shaped by people's perception of a place. It arises from an interaction between collective experience and representational practices, as mediated by the built environment. Both the City and members of SCI viewed Coney Island as self-evidently iconic and used this assessment to bolster their claims about the neighborhood's past, present, and future. Iconicity therefore offers a good launching point for making sense of the groups' commonalities and differences. I center my query around two primary research questions: how the groups understood Coney Island's iconicity; and how they mobilized these understandings and translated them into development platforms throughout the planning process. The first question deals with the City's and the advocates' views of the neighborhood. It addresses the

groups' perspective on what is there, what it means, and how it is experienced or otherwise understood. These three sets of narratives speak to Coney Island's material, representational, and experiential dimensions. I rely on these dimensions for their complementary emphases. The analytic distinction among them is tenuous. It is hard to dissociate one's image of a place from one's experience of it (which itself gives rise to further images), or to offer a description of a built environment uncalibrated by meaning—by a sense of what matters and what doesn't. Nonetheless, these dimensions provide distinct ways of thinking about a place and therefore offer a useful way of breaking down contrasting perspectives on Coney Island and on its iconic importance.

The second question addresses the connection between the groups' ideas about Coney Island and their ideas about the neighborhood's redevelopment. This part of the discussion centers on the rationalities through which their ideas about the place got translated into a plan. By rationality I mean a set of criteria for optimizing the connection between planning means and goals. This analytic tool helps me unpack the City and the advocates' development ideas. Unlike the pluralist model, which treats goals as expressions of pre-existing and unexamined interests and values (Albrechts 2003), the notion of rationalities allows me to regard those values as dynamic principles of action and considers their content. This helps me explain how the planning conflict between the groups originated and evolved throughout the planning process.

## A. Findings

My findings show broad agreement between the City and members of SCI about the local attributes that contribute to Coney Island's iconic stature. Both groups underscored the importance of amusement attractions and used the notions of authenticity, eccentricity, and the unexpected to explain the neighborhood's fame and uniqueness. Because I treat these qualities as outcomes of diverse modes of engaging a place, they become more than mere points of agreement or self-evident virtues; they become windows for exploring the differences between SCI and the City and for explaining the source of their conflict.

For both groups, these local qualities had a basis in a shared body of historic representations. For the advocates, however, they also reflected and shaped a range of experiences in the neighborhood. For the City, on the other hand, they primarily constituted local selling points grounded on analyses of the latest trends in the amusement park industry. This difference led to divergent views of Coney Island, rendering certain neighborhood features valuable to one group and negligible to the other. It also translated throughout the planning process into contrasting development visions. The groups' common emphasis on amusement uses masked profound differences in their preferred planning approach. Whereas the advocates stressed preservation and organic continuities even in their promotion of grand gestures, the City favored reviving Coney Island's former allure through the emulation of successful contemporary amusement formulas.

The public review process intended to address and reconcile the differences between the groups did neither in Coney Island. If anything, it confounded SCI

and deepened its members' resentment toward the City and toward its redevelopment plan.

## B. Significance

My work builds on scholarship regarding the politics of spatial representation and the discursive practices that shape the meaning of places. It also contributes to a line of research that emphasizes the experiential dimension of place as a key and irreducible aspect of its meaning. The integration of these analytic frameworks in the study of struggles over space produces a rich account of the spatial origins and effects of cultural claims.

The case of Coney Island illustrates divergent and ultimately conflicting ways of forging the relation between a place and a plan—between the multiplicity of relationships and meanings that constitute the neighborhood and the visions for its future. It also documents the failures of the planning process to handle this conflict and uncover its basis. This failure demonstrates the need for a richer planning epistemology. It displays the limited ability of prevailing planning practice to recognize and engage the complexity of a neighborhood and to comprehend not only which places matter, but how and why they matter.

Finally, this study suggests that a greater focus on the subjective experience of place would offer a deeper insight into people's relation to neighborhoods and into the origins of planning conflict, thereby making possible the formulation of more responsive and equitable plans. Such considered attention would also increase the likelihood of conflict resolution based not on zero-sum adversarial trade-offs, which

invariably favor the powerful, but on a negotiated reconceptualization of a place and of its future.

### C. Organization and Presentation

The chapters that follow deal first with the methodological approach to my research and subsequently with the theoretical foundation for this study. The balance of the work consists of my research findings and is divided into two broad sections. One chronicles the planning process. The other deals with SCI and the City's contribution to that process, exploring the perspectives that they brought to bear through their participation. These accounts complement each other. The chronicle covers the groups' interactions in the public realm and describes their reactions to each other. The depiction of the groups' perspectives, on the other hand, helps make sense of the conflicts recounted in the chronicle. For this reason, I have not organized these sections sequentially. Doing so would have introduced too much space between them, obscuring the connections between the planning process and the views of its participants. Instead, I have interwoven the parts devoted to the City and SCI into the chronicle to roughly coincide with the timing of their respective involvement.

The chronicle is preceded by a prologue that recounts the Giuliani administration's effort to build KeySpan Park, the project that under Mayor Michael Bloomberg led to the creation of the Coney Island Development Corporation (CIDC) and to his administration's redevelopment initiative in the neighborhood. The chronicle itself coincides with my study period, beginning with the formation of the CIDC in 2003 and concluding in the summer of 2010, the first season after the ratification of the

City's redevelopment plan. This twelve-year period, and especially the period during which the planning process unfolded, was one of great volatility in the local real estate market. The mid-2000s saw a construction boom that expanded beyond Manhattan and reached areas that seldom see much real estate activity, such as the outer reaches of Brooklyn, where Coney Island is located (Gallahue 2006). Several major projects were spearheaded by the City itself (Bagli 2005). All of this activity ground to a halt in 2008 as a result of the credit crunch and ensuing financial crisis (Calder 2008b; Geller 2008; Lemire 2008). While I don't dwell on the particulars of this boom-bust cycle, it does provide an important backdrop for the narrower story told in the chronicle and for the City and the advocates' assessment of Coney Island's redevelopment.

The section devoted to the City and SCI is divided into parts dealing with: the constitution of the groups; their relation to Coney Island; their account of the neighborhood conditions; their image of the amusement area; their engagement with Coney Island; and their vision for its redevelopment. The surveys of local conditions offer a description of what there was in Coney Island before the City's involvement, in the case of the advocates, and immediately before the rezoning, in the case of the City. The accounts of the neighborhood's image cover the types of representations and associations that give rise to iconic identity of the place. The segments dealing with the groups' engagement with the neighborhood focus, respectively, on the advocates' experience in Coney Island and on the City's analysis of the site. And the last part of this section addresses the groups' ideas about the types of development best suited for the neighborhood.

Although I present these parts separately, they relate to each other in ways that become apparent throughout my discussion. The neighborhood surveys reflect the meanings ascribed to the neighborhood by the groups and provide a material basis for those meanings. The various representations of Coney Island (and, for some, the experiences in the neighborhood) shape each other, defining the place, and giving rise to a sense of “what it’s about.” These dynamics translate into development ideas that themselves inform the evaluation of conditions in the neighborhood. The section on SCI and the City therefore deals with these interrelated ways of thinking about Coney Island and about its future.

In the segments devoted to the City and SCI, I have tried to present the group’s perspectives on Coney Island and on the neighborhood’s redevelopment in their own respective voices. This choice is meant to not only more accurately convey the groups’ accounts, but to do so in the language often used and encountered throughout the planning process. The differences, however, between the groups and between the types of data I used (discussed below) complicated this narrative approach. In order to capture the City’s views on the various topics addressed in this section, I could simply draw from city communications where such views are explicitly laid out. If I wanted to know, for instance, which neighborhood features the City regarded as most significant, I could consult documents and presentations that address this question directly. If I wanted to learn about the administration’s thoughts on development, I could find those thoughts clearly articulated in its strategic plan for Coney Island and in the redevelopment plan that followed. The City’s sources consequently allowed me to step back, avoid explication in the third-person, and simply let city officials and consultants do the talking. I could not do

likewise with SCI. Unlike the City, advocates neither spoke in a unified voice nor documented their views to correspond with the topics addressed in my study. As a result, I could not simply relay their answers. I had to synthesize them, extracting common themes, and sorting out points of disagreement. The segments dealing with SCI therefore present the advocates' perspectives already mediated by my analysis and from the perspective of the analyst, me.

The one exception to this is SCI's survey of Coney Island. There, I wanted to do justice to the richness and eclecticism of the advocates' experiences in the neighborhood. Hence, I shied away from synthesis and instead adopted an aggregative narrative approach. I allowed the advocates' assorted stories stand on their own side-by-side and play off each other, even at the expense of consistency. The assembled descriptions and stories were offered in response to questions about memorable Coney Island experiences and about aspects of the neighborhood that best capture for visitors the essence of the place. The result is a sort of tour of present-day Coney Island led by the collective SCI mind that highlights places of interest, often through anecdotes. Because frequent personal recollections and historical allusions strain the narrative and temporal coherence of this tour, I have tried to fill in gaps and contextualize the advocates' accounts by occasionally providing some historical background. I drew this material from the two historical sources most commonly shared by the advocates: Charles Denson's *Coney Island Lost and Found* and Ric Burns' *Coney Island* documentary.

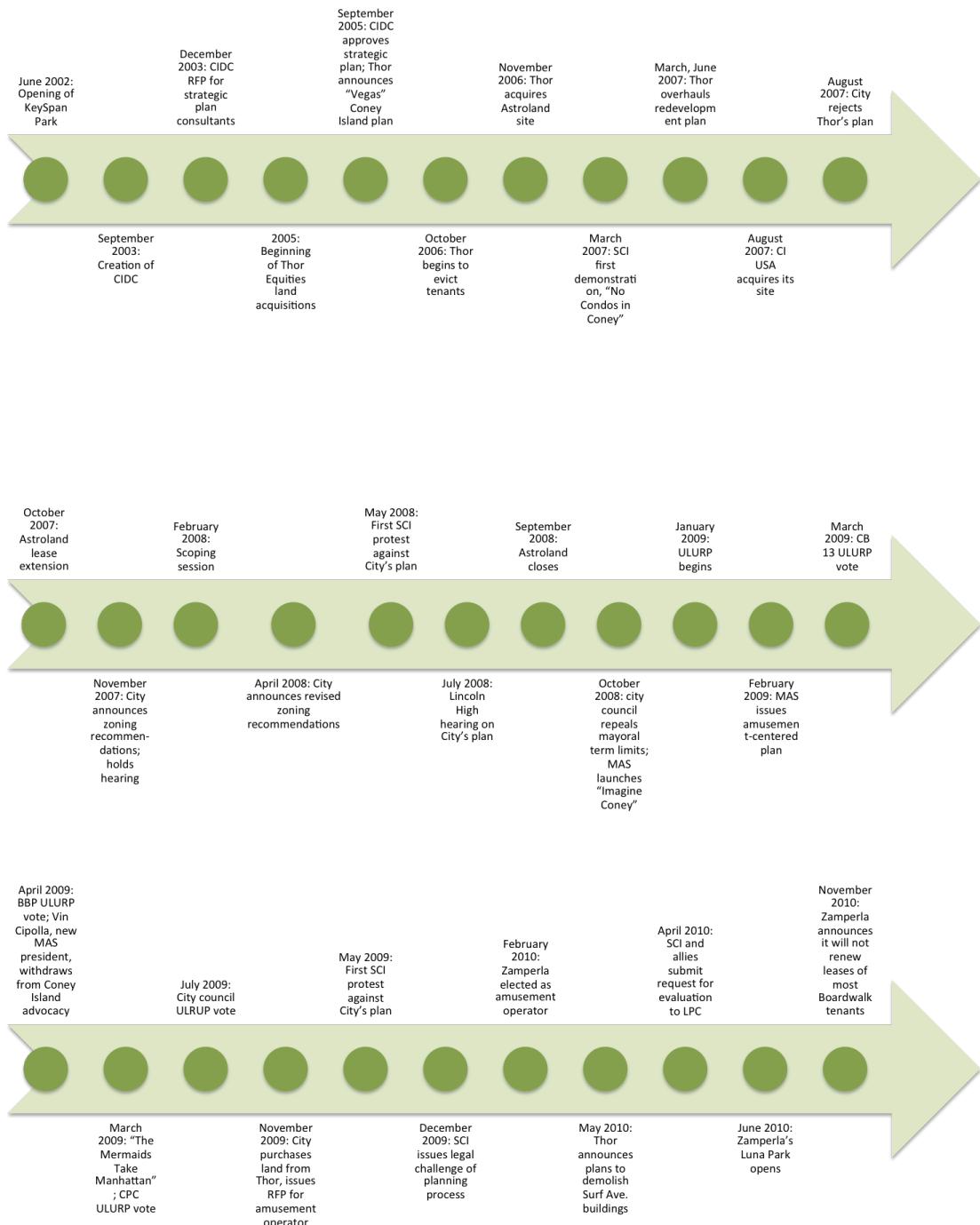
The chronicle and the section devoted to SCI and the City are followed by a section on the encounters between the groups throughout the planning process. This

discussion recounts how the groups perceived this process, their own and each other's participation in it, and the conflict that unfolded along the way. Finally, the last section offers, by way of conclusion, an analysis of the divergent goals and assumptions that shaped the City's and the advocates' redevelopment plans and that ultimately sparked the groups' conflict over the redevelopment of Coney Island.

#### Abbreviations:

- Coney Island Development Corporation (CIDC)
- New York City Department of City Planning (DCP)
- Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS)
- New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC)
- Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS)
- Historic District Council (HDC)
- Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC)
- Request for Proposal (RFP)
- Save Coney Island (SCI)
- Brooklyn Borough President (BBP)
- Community Board (CB)
- City Planning Commission (CPC)

## Timeline:



## VI. Methodology

This dissertation is a case study of the redevelopment of Coney Island. I have chosen to do a case study because I seek to examine comprehensively an example of a phenomenon—the redevelopment of an iconic place. The goal of my project is to elaborate on theories that deal with this phenomenon. Case study findings are generalizable theoretically, not from case to case or from case to a population of cases. In other words, the value of a case study depends on the strength of its “hypothetico-deductive” theorizing, and not on the strength of its statistical inferences (Ruddin 2006). In case studies, this form of theorizing emerges from a recursive process of hypothesis formation and testing. Case studies do not begin with fully developed hypotheses like other forms of research, because the nature of the case is not apparent at the outset of the study (George and McKeown 1984). The process of defining the case as a case of something—the "casing"—involves the iterative and tentative application of theoretical frameworks throughout the course of the research. It is this process that generates hypotheses and that makes theoretical generalization possible (Ragin 2009).

The strength of case studies lies in the detailed description of the unique features of the case. The “thickness” of case descriptions is what provides the grounds for the refutation or elaboration of existing theory (Ruddin 2006). In this case study, I use qualitative methods to describe and compare how the City and members of SCI understood Coney Island and how they drew on the neighborhood’s iconic significance to develop divergent redevelopment plans. I describe these methods in the sections below.

## A. Case Selection

Because I am interested in the origin of place meanings and in how those meanings inform redevelopment plans, I have selected as my case an iconic neighborhood, Coney Island—a neighborhood whose identity and future have periodically become matters of public concern. Coney Island remains one of the most iconic neighborhoods in New York City. While its fame may have waned since its early 20<sup>th</sup> century heyday, it endures nonetheless. Countless representations and memories of multiple generations of visitors have led to a strong association between Coney Island and notions of “authentic” New York and “authentic” Brooklyn. As a result, the plan for the redevelopment of the amusement area drew local, national, and international coverage and commentary, including criticism from commentators concerned with the impact of the planned changes. Few large-scale projects in New York City since the redevelopment of Times Square have inspired such widespread debate about what a neighborhood “is about” and about whether its redevelopment will remain true to its historic function, image, and identity. This type of debate can arise in connection with any neighborhood. But the stature of places like Coney Island amplifies these controversies, making their origins and articulation easier to discern and study.

While Coney Island’s iconicity distinguishes it from other neighborhoods, the City’s redevelopment plan typified a common approach to economic development in New York City—the intensification of land uses and valorization of land through large-scale development projects formulated and implemented by the City in collaboration with the private sector. If Times Square offers an especially prominent and ambitious application of this model during the 1980s and 1990s,

Coney Island presents a contemporary example of the same, as well as an opportunity to examine how public claims to a neighborhood arise in the present-day development context and how these claims are negotiated throughout the prevailing planning process. My study period begins with the creation in 2003 of the local development corporation (the CIDC) that spearheaded the formulation of a Coney Island redevelopment plan, and it concludes in the summer of 2010, the first summer season after the ratification of the plan.

Before addressing the questions of access, research tools, and limitations—as well as to enliven this methodology section with a touch of human interest—a few words about my relationship to my case are in order. I first learned of Coney Island while writing a paper on sports stadiums for a Masters course on urban redevelopment—a paper that led to a larger assignment in 2004 on the early stages of the plan for the redevelopment of the neighborhood. During the course of my research, I became friends with Dianna Carlin, the owner of Lola Staar, a souvenir shop on the Coney Island Boardwalk, and remained friends with her past the completion of my Masters studies. I paid only sporadic attention over the next few years to the progress being made on the City's plan until Carlin asked me for legal help (I am a lawyer) with problems she was having with her new landlord, Thor Equities. Those problems turned out to be directly related to the planning controversy that had started brewing in the neighborhood.

As the planning process progressed, Carlin started asking me for planning help, which really meant help organizing the small advocacy group that she, along with a handful of Coney Island regulars, had recently formed: SCI. The group had grown

out of a protest against Thor Equities, but had subsequently also begun to oppose aspects of the City's plan. I agreed to help, figuring that, although I had no experience organizing advocacy efforts, I knew people who did. Having previously worked for several of the City's planning and development agencies, I also had knowledge of the process through which redevelopment plans are formulated and approved. When the controversy between the various stakeholders intensified, so did my involvement with SCI, until I was serving as a spokesman for the group and participating in its lobbying efforts. I did not especially seek these responsibilities, and in fact resisted them. But the group lacked members willing and able to take them on; and so they fell on my lap.

I had initially agreed to help SCI out of friendship, but I continued to do so out of stubbornness and out of sympathy for the group's position. On the one hand, I suspected that SCI would struggle in making its voice heard, because of its lack of resources, political influence, and lobbying experience. And on the other, the advocates' insights into the neighborhood and concerns about the City's plan made sense, especially in light of the administration's redevelopment track record. Recent large-scale projects—some of which I had worked on or observed from up-close myself while working for the City—stood out for their banality, inflexibility, and disregard for existing uses. While I didn't hold out much hope for a different outcome in Coney Island, I also didn't want to give up on SCI's attempts to achieve something better.

When I decided to do a case study of Coney Island, I considered the ways in which my involvement with SCI might call into question my findings. Had my activities

created my own data? Would my bias contaminate my research? I lay those concerns aside for two reasons. First, I do not put much stock in the ideal of researcher impartiality, and I regard disclosure and self-awareness as better strategies for dealing with bias than the illusion that it does not exist. Second and more importantly, I realized that my research questions did not concern my participation in the planning process. I may have helped organize SCI, helped shape its demands and campaigns, and lobbied on its behalf. But my research questions did not deal with grassroots organizing or with planning negotiations. I had little research interest in the portion of the process that I witnessed, because I found it by and large predictable: a relatively powerless group had failed in its efforts to modify a standard-issue plan that benefited more influential stakeholders. My attention therefore drew away from the terms of the City's plan and of SCI's demands and toward the values and logics that gave rise to them. In the case of the City, I trained my focus on the goals and analyses that sparked the planning process, and in the case of SCI, on the attachments and concerns that motivated its members' mobilization and development ideas. These motivations varied among members and mostly hid from view during SCI's campaign, because they were obscured by the group's unified advocacy platform.

As I refined my research questions, I grew confident that my advocacy had not compromised by project. My involvement in the planning process had no bearing on the Administration's interest in or understanding of Coney Island. It also had little influence on the advocates' relationship to the neighborhood, which developed well before I came into the picture and which differed categorically from my own. Unlike all other members of SCI, my connection to Coney Island was primarily

intellectual and grew out of my advocacy (rather than the other way around). I have hardly ever visited Coney Island for recreation. It's far from where I live, and I enjoy neither beaches nor crowds. As of the time of the rezoning, I had only ridden two of the rides in the amusement area (the Wonder Wheel and the Astrotower, one time apiece), never set foot on the Coney Island beach, and attended the Mermaid Parade only once, to distribute SCI literature. I say all this not to boast about how little I know about the neighborhood about which I'm subjecting the dear reader to a few hundred pages of writing, but to illustrate the difference between my perspective and that of the advocates who are the focus of my research. Their views on Coney Island arose out of a history of experiences in the neighborhood and formed well before SCI came into being, and certainly before I became involved in the group's efforts. My involvement with SCI therefore did little to "contaminate" my data. Nonetheless, it did pose several methodological obstacles. It is to those obstacles that I now turn.

## B. Access

My work with SCI involved participation in dozens of events, including hearings, negotiations, rallies, and internal meetings. Through these events, I witnessed multiple parts of the planning process and became acquainted with many of the people who participated in these efforts, dealing with a good number of them personally. This gave me privileged access to many of the project's stakeholders, even as it complicated my relationship with city officials, who came to regard SCI as an adversarial group. This influenced my research design and my choice of research tools in ways described in the limitations section below.

## C. Primary Research Tools

My project relied on archival research and interviews. I also consulted at the outset secondary sources to familiarize myself with Coney Island's history, with the particulars of the City's redevelopment efforts, and with the context that surrounded them. This background served as useful preparation for examining primary sources pertaining to the City's plan and for conducting interviews of individuals with long histories in the neighborhood and/or deep knowledge of it. My historical sources (listed in Appendix A) cover all periods of Coney Island as an amusement destination, leading up to the opening of the new minor league stadium in 2001. With regard to the City's planning initiative, I reviewed all major local newspaper and blog coverage on the matter (see Appendix B) starting with the stadium project and through the end of my study period. Finally, to complement my own perspective on the administration's planning approach—a perspective based on both my experience working for the City and my participation in the Coney Island public review process—I reviewed academic literature on major redevelopment projects undertaken during Bloomberg's tenure.

### **Archival Research**

To understand the origins of the City's redevelopment effort and the thinking that shaped it throughout the planning process, I reviewed the following materials.

- Press conferences and press releases by the administration dealing with the CIDC or with Coney Island;
- Requests for Proposal (RFPs) issued by the New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC) for the formulation of a strategic plan;

- The winning bid by the consulting team that prepared the strategic plan;
- The reports and strategic plan produced by the consulting team;
- Presentations of the plan prepared by EDC and the Department of City Planning (DCP) at different stages in the planning process;
- The scope of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and the Final EIS (FEIS);
- The proposed and adopted changes to the zoning resolutions;
- The RFP issued by the EDC for an amusement operator;
- The winning bid by an amusement operator;
- Raw footage of interviews with city officials conducted for documentaries about the Coney Island redevelopment (Appendix C).
- Interviews provided with city officials in local newspapers.
- Personal correspondence with advocates that documented SCI's dealings with city officials.

## **Interviews**

To understand the basis of SCI members' opposition to the City's plan as well as their ideas about Coney Island and their development aspirations for the neighborhood, I interviewed thirty-four advocates. These were confidential, semi-structured, recorded (and subsequently transcribed) interviews lasting between one and two hours. Although I followed a protocol (Appendix D), my questions were open-ended, and I regularly asked for elaboration and clarification. I also allowed interviewees to stray from my line of inquiry and tell whatever stories they deemed relevant. The interviews focused on the advocates' personal experiences

and views, and dealt with SCI's advocacy platform only secondarily and in terms of the interviewees' perspective. The first part addressed the advocates' personal backgrounds and earliest encounters with Coney Island. The second concerned their past relationship to the neighborhood and asked them to describe Coney Island and explain what drew them there. The third part covered the advocates' motivation for getting involved in the planning process, the nature of their involvement, and their impressions of the proceedings. Finally, the last section asked them to reflect upon the outcome of the planning process.

### *Sample Selection*

I first interviewed SCI members who participated most extensively throughout the public review process. Those individuals may not have been representative of all those who opposed the City's plan on similar grounds. The extent of their involvement in rallies and hearings suggests either an unusual level of commitment or an unusual amount of free time. Still, I was not looking for statistical representativeness. I was looking for rich and diverse accounts of people's relationship to Coney Island and of their views of the neighborhood and its redevelopment. For these purposes, it seemed sensible to begin with advocates who appeared to harbor especially intense feeling about the project, since their interviews were likely to yield the sort of strong opinions I was seeking. From there, I expanded my interview pool to include more casual participants and continued doing so until I reached the point of saturation—until my interviews began to yield mostly variations on the same themes.

## **Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data entailed the coding of interview transcripts and a narrative analysis of all materials. I triangulated among the sources, identifying and developing recurring concepts and themes. From those themes, I then extrapolated broader narratives.

## **D. Limitations**

I organized this study as a parallel query, because I wanted to investigate the commitments, experiences, and assumptions that gave rise to two divergent views of a neighborhood and its redevelopment, and I then wanted to see how those two perspectives came into conflict and evolved throughout the planning process. My methods, however, were not parallel and neither were my data. This was partly due to the difference in my level of access to the groups I studied. In order to learn about the advocates' feelings towards Coney Island, I could simply ask them about it; or, more precisely, I could ask them a series of questions that indirectly led to the same point. I could not do likewise with the City—I could not just pose questions to "the City" and await "its" response. I therefore turned instead to interview transcripts, reports, and presentations and fished there for answers to my questions. The nature of these sources, however, presented an epistemological problem.

Unlike the advocates' replies, the City's data were not produced in response to my questions and with the intent of earnestly answering them. The City's data had other purposes and other audiences. The EIS, for instance, fulfilled a legal requirement of disclosure of the plan's impact. The consultant report, for another,

responded to a series of research and analytic tasks set out by the City. And the answers given by city officials during interviews attempted to convince the public of the advisability of the administration's plan. I consequently could not take these sources at face value nor treat them as a reflection of the City's opinions and intentions. I used two strategies to overcome this limitation. First, I looked beyond the explanations provided by the City and focused on the choices it made throughout the planning process. Many of the answers to my questions lay not in the City's rationalizations, but in the values and logics implied by its planning decisions: to start the project by launching a local development corporation; to hire a consulting team based on particular criteria; to have that team undertake a certain kind of analysis; to organize a redevelopment plan around a rezoning; and so forth. My second strategy consisted of triangulating among my sources. The recurrence and absence of themes, narratives, and explanations do not remove all doubt that the City's words reflected its true perspective; but it increased the likelihood that they did.

I initially selected my disparate research methods to deal with the problem of access. As it turned out, these choices ended up also being better suited for dealing with the differences between SCI and the City as research subjects. In the case of SCI, my concern lay with the individual perspectives of its members and not with the organization itself. Therefore, SCI's press statements and materials would have offered an inadequate substitute for personal interviews. With the City, on the other hand, my focus lay entirely on the entity and not on its constitutive parts. Even if I had gained access to the Mayor and obtained from him answers that went beyond those offered for public consumption, I would still not have gotten a full

explanation for the City's plan. Had access (full access) been a possibility, such an explanation would have at a minimum also required interviews with the other individuals involved in the project up and down the hierarchy of city government, as well as insight into both how the relevant government bodies and their agents operate individually and in relation to one another, and how the various personalities involved shaped the planning process. As I enjoyed nothing close to that level of access, my alternative research approach proved advantageous. Rather than seek answers from decision-making sources, I deduced them from planning decisions and results.

Focusing on the City's paper trail allowed me to explain much about the formulation of the City's plan. It presented, however, one notable disadvantage. It gave me only occasional insight into the administration's perspective on SCI's opposition. The advocates spent the entire planning process trying to articulate their concerns, reacting to the City's decisions, and seeking to influence future ones. In their interviews, they shared their various theories about the motivations and logics that might have shaped the City's plan, and they reflected on the ways in which their participation in the process changed their own ideas about Coney Island. I did not have comparable data on the City. Outside of a few comments by city officials during interviews, the only evidence of the City's reaction to SCI's perspectives lay in the administration's apparent unwillingness to take them into account by modifying its plan (although even that could be attributed to other considerations). Given these limitations, my findings focus primarily on how the differences between the groups' plans arose. They do then address the effects of the ensuing conflict; but they do so mostly from the perspective of members of SCI.



## VII. Theorizing the Origins of Planning Conflict

I relied on three sets of literatures for this project. The first helps understand urban redevelopment as policy-making and comprises several debates. One of them focuses on the locus of urban policy decision-making. Another deals with the structural forces that constrain those decisions and that unfold across scales over which urban actors have only limited control. And a third considers the ascendancy of the entrepreneurial mode of urban governance as it applies to redevelopment policy and planning practice.

The second set of literatures deals with the relationship between redevelopment and the meaning of places. These debates offer ways to examine the nature, origin, and implications of those meanings by integrating theoretical notions concerning the material production of space with post-structuralist insights into the social construction of space. Some of these debates focus on the interaction of these processes within a capitalist context. Others do so with regard to non-capitalist power structures. Both theoretical approaches have inspired research on several urban redevelopment modalities, such as gentrification, tourism development, and historic preservation.

The third set of literatures offers alternative ways of conceptualizing planning conflict. Some of these works specifically address the sort of conflict that attends the prevailing approach to urban redevelopment, a strategy grounded on market-driven rationales. Others look more broadly at planning conflict as the result of an interaction in the planning process between disparate theoretical frameworks.

The debates reviewed in this chapter offer a variety of ways of making sense of the policy decisions that shape contemporary redevelopment plans, like the one advanced by the City in Coney Island. They also offer ways to interpret the meanings of places and the relation of those meanings to urban redevelopment. Together, these literatures help us see the planning controversy in Coney Island both in terms of structured sets of economic and political relations and also in terms of competing visions of what that neighborhood is and of whom it is for.

### **A. Urban Redevelopment as Policy**

The first section of this review deals with urban redevelopment as policy-making. The first set of debates deals with the driving forces behind urban policy. Some of them have focused on the actors responsible for making decisions and on the distribution of power within the urban political landscape. Others have centered on the structural context within which those actors operate and have attempted to explain shifts in redevelopment policy in terms of the restructuring of the political economy. The second set of debates concerns the causes for and significance of the shift in urban governance that followed the urban crisis of the 1970s—a shift that involved greater emphasis on deregulation and fiscal austerity, as well as a greater reliance by the public sector on entrepreneurial practices and public-private partnerships. These trends transformed both the politics of urban redevelopment and the repertoire of redevelopment and planning approaches embraced by cities.

#### **Who Governs Cities?**

There has been a long-standing debate among urban scholars about the source of urban policy decisions. This has pitted theories that locate power in the hands of a

minority of powerful individuals (i.e., elite theory) against those that propose a more fluid political landscape made up of shifting allegiances, none of which ever dominates for long over the others (i.e., pluralism).

Elite theory understands society as a hierarchy constituted by the rulers and the ruled. It views cities as the product of decisions made by a small, organized group of local elites. The application of elite theory to urban governance is an attempt to test empirically the intuition that someone somewhere must be calling the shots. Pioneering efforts studied individuals reputed to be local powerbrokers (Hunter 1969). Critics of this approach objected to the lack of evidence of the elite actually exercising power. As an alternative, they employed a “decisional methodology”, which focused on the process by which controversial policy decisions are made. This approach formed the basis for pluralist research (Judge 1995).

Conceived less as a theory than as an empirical description, pluralism rejects elite theory's depiction of urban politics as a stratified power structure governed by a small class of individuals. It regards power instead as fragmented, decentralized, and negotiated both within and beyond formal institutions (Dahl 2005). The very indeterminacy of political outcomes lends legitimacy to the political process. Not everyone may care about every issue; and not everyone may have equal access to the resources necessary to influence policy-making. But everyone does have access to some resources and the capacity to organize with like-minded individuals. Since no one type of resource offers control over every issue, and since the capacity and inclination to mobilize is always uncertain, no one group can ever predominate in the long run over local politics (Judge 1995).

Critics of pluralism counter that the study of controversial policy decisions—pluralists' favored methodological approach—does not provide a proper basis for reaching conclusions about who governs. It may tell us something about issues that have made it to the public arena; but it does not allow us to examine either agenda-setting processes or policy decisions made outside the domain of public deliberation. These omissions lead to a skewed perspective of the workings of power—one that, in its commitment to a liberal view of the democratic process, fails to explain the persistence of inequality (Harding 1995).

Subsequent elaborations of elite theory and pluralism addressed some of the criticism raised against them. In the case of the former, this has included attempts to account for the indeterminacy of outcomes and to identify the sources of elite power and describe its operation. In the case of the latter, it has involved efforts to explain the endurance of power imbalances despite the fluidity of political alliances (*ibid.*). Logan and Molotch's (L&M) growth machine thesis, which some regard as a refinement of elite theory (*ibid.*), is an attempt to produce a voluntaristic model of redevelopment politics that counters the more deterministic theories found in the work of Chicago-school urban ecologists and Marxists (Logan and Molotch 2007). According to this model, landed interests that benefit from growth—a "growth machine" that comprises developers, land owners, trade unions, elected officials, tourism industry, local media, utilities, etc.—exert a disproportionate influence over the development process. The elite class that makes up the growth machine has vast resources: local elected officials have legislative and executive powers; landed interests have money and land control; the local media have the power of

persuasion, and so forth. Consequently, this coalition tends to succeed in imposing its agenda and passing it off as universally beneficial. Nonetheless, successful challenges to the pro-growth agenda do occur. They tend to arise from coalitions of individuals who value land for its function—it use value—rather than for its market or exchange value. This contingency allows the model to account for outcome indeterminacy despite persistent structural power asymmetries (*ibid.*).

Regime theory builds on a pluralist foundation, and like pluralism, is developed inductively through case studies (Stoker 1995). This theory recognizes the influence of systemic power, but understands it less as a matter of control than as a capacity to get things done. The mechanism through which that capacity is exercised is the regime—“an informal yet relatively stable group with access to institutional resources that enable it to have a sustained role in making governing decisions” (Stone 1993). Regimes derive their power from their constituents’ control of resources and from their possession of strategic knowledge. There is a variety of regimes, organized around diverse sets of goals, not all of which revolve around growth (Logan and Molotch 1999). This variety prevents any one regime—even one constituted by landed interests—from running roughshod over the political landscape (Lauria 1999). But it does not foreclose the possibility of relatively stable government arrangements—arrangements that are necessary to make policy effectively.

Regime theory and the growth machine model offer two compatible ways of understanding the relationship between urban policy and individuals and groups operating within the urban sphere. In the case of Coney Island, they might

anticipate the composition and effectiveness of the coalitions that mobilized around the area's redevelopment plan. Both frameworks, however, struggle to connect the actions of local individuals and groups to a broader political economy. A number of research programs have attempted to address this gap by looking at structural forces that transgress the boundaries of local governance. The next section is devoted to these attempts.

### **The Context of Governance**

Researchers have tried, from a variety of theoretical perspectives, to contextualize cities within the broader political economy and to understand the limits of local autonomy in urban governance. Paul Peterson produced an early, influential approach, a “city limits” thesis that revolved around the notion of inter-urban competition. Peterson argues that the fundamental goal of city government is to maximize an economic return on the resources that lie within the city limits. Urban prosperity depends on the success of that effort. As a result, cities need to compete among themselves to attract and retain footloose capital—something that constrains the range of policy choices available to local government (Peterson 1981).

Some critics have rejected Peterson’s thesis by challenging its assumptions about capital’s footlooseness and about the interchangeability of cities (Clarke, S. 1998). Others have challenged the business analogy that lies at the core of Peterson’s analysis (Stone and Sanders 1987). Cities are not businesses. City dwellers are not investors awaiting a return on their “city stock.” They are users of the city, with particular and diverse ideas about how it should develop. Cities cannot single-mindedly pursue the goal of productivity-maximization, because it’s not clear what that maximization would entail. Determining the most “productive” use of land is

precisely the stuff of local politics. This means that, while cities may well compete with each other on a number of levels, competition also unfolds within cities. Therefore, whatever inter-urban competitive constraints there may be on local agency, local politics still plays a crucial role in arranging the division of labor between the state and the private sector and in formulating a local response to those constraints (*ibid.*).

Geographers Kevin Cox and James DeFilippis have relied on alternative empirical and theoretical grounds to also call into question Peterson's assumptions concerning capital mobility (DeFilippis 1999; Cox 1993). Theoretically, their argument hinges on a relational understanding of locality and autonomy. They treat each category as the product of an ongoing and contingent set of social relations. Locality refers to a scale of experience; local autonomy, to the ability to control the relations that define that scale; and local dependence, to the non-substitutability of those relations. These formulations guard against the common slippage among the categories of capital, the global, and mobility, and among those of cities, the local, and capital-dependence. They also provide conceptual tools to disentangle the complex relations among labor, capital, and the state, and to enlarge the context of questions about the political economy of cities beyond the level of local government, without succumbing to Peterson's structural reductionism.

Regulation theory provides an alternative theorization of the limits of urban governance, using a highly developed Marxist conceptualization of the multi-scalar relation between the state and capitalism. According to some strains of orthodox Marxism, the state exists primarily to enable and serve the needs of capitalism.

Regulation theory resists this proposition, stressing the importance of political processes, specifically those that regulate economic life. Such regulation is neither necessarily deliberate nor automatic. It arises as a result—often the unintended result—of interactions between economic, social, political, and cultural dynamics (Painter et al. 1995). The concept of “regime of accumulation” refers to the particular kind of economic relationship between investment, production, and consumption. The “mode of regulation” identifies the regulatory institutions and practices (both social, political, and cultural) that support a particular regime (Hall and Hubbard 1998). Concepts such as Fordism, post-Fordism, Keynesianism, post-Keynesianism, and Neoliberalism arise from this analytic approach (Painter et al. 1995).

Neoliberalism is commonly understood as a shift from state-oriented to market-oriented modes of governance in response to the deterritorialization of capitalist activity. Recent work in the tradition of Regulation theory, however, disputes that understanding, emphasizing instead the active role of the state in the restructuring of the economy. That process has had two moments: a) the roll-back, which refers to the dismantling and discrediting of the Keynesian welfare state; and b) the roll-out, which refers to the construction of Post-Keynesian modes of governance (i.e., the expansion of market mechanisms and logics). This transition has reconstituted scale politics so that local institutions have been “given responsibility without power” and “international institutions [have been given] power without responsibility” (Peck and Tickell 2003). Crucially, Neoliberalism inhabits “not only institutions and places but also the spaces between them.” This has given rise to an inter-urban competitiveness that has had a disciplining effect on local government,

making it difficult for progressive urban governments to disembed themselves from the logic of capitalist spatial relations—a logic that is promoted in the name of efficiency (*ibid.*).

At first glance, the conception of inter-city competition associated with Neoliberalism resembles Peterson's city limits thesis. The former, however, arises with a framework that makes room from local politics and, therefore, for the possibility of resistance. Brenner and Theodore, for instance, understand Neoliberalism as a series of “path-dependent, contextually-specific interactions between inherited regulatory landscapes and market-oriented restructuring projects at a broad range of geographical scales” (Brenner et al, 2003b). For them, then, Neoliberalism is less a policy model imposed on places than a *place-bound* transformation in the *politically* constituted character of economic relations. Cities, as preeminent sites of institutional restructuring and policy experimentation, may well have provided a key arena for the Neoliberal transformation. But they can just as well serve as sites of opposition (*ibid.*). How, exactly, is not clear. Many agree that the Neoliberal project is never stable or complete (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008). But even those who recognize its contingencies cannot help but emphasize in their empirical work the predominance of global market forces and the futility of resistance (Cochrane 1999).

In the end, the question of local autonomy remains unsettled. Is the fate of cities determined by local agents or by structures and extra-local forces over which those agents have little control? Some scholars argue that the answer is both, or, that it depends. Ideological and material forces structure an individual's position,

influencing his preferences and constraining his range of available choices (Fainstein 2001). But there does remain a level of individual choice, which does have the capacity to effect gradual structural transformations. Recent research on urban change at citywide and neighborhood levels demonstrate possible ways to disentangle the intricate links between urban politics and overarching social structures (Sugrue 2005; Sites 2003).

Sugrue tells the story of Detroit's urban crisis as the result of the "coincidence and mutual reinforcement of race, economics, and politics, in a particular historical moment." His story unfolds at a variety of scales, with extra-local policies, such as federal housing policy, interacting with very local racial dynamics and politics to transform residential neighborhoods throughout the city (Sugrue 2005). Sites, another example, organizes his study of the gentrification of the Lower East Side "vertically" to demonstrate how that transformation implicated state action and private interests at a neighborhood, city, national, and transnational level. His study challenges the prevailing notion that globalization is an inevitable force in the face of which the local state and the community are helpless. It argues instead that urban politics and community action can have an impact at all levels (Sites 2003). "Can", of course, is different than "does." Examples of successful local resistance are rare next to counterexamples of apparent structural determinism. In Fainstein's assessment, pragmatic resistance to the Neoliberal agenda entails identifying "areas of indeterminacy that can be seized locally within the overall economic structure" to produce better, more equitable results, without expecting either total victory or total defeat (Fainstein 2001, 17).

Regulation theory and the study of Neoliberalism allow us to understand urban policy making as a process that unfolds across a variety of scales. They conceptualize political economic structures as dynamic processes that shape and are shaped by local decisions. With regard to Coney Island, they help us make sense of why development decisions happened when they did and how they did by locating the Bloomberg administration's approach to urban governance in relation to the political-economic restructuring that followed the 1970s urban crisis.

### **The Mode of Urban Governance**

Urban geographers and political theorists have drawn from Regulation theory to explain the mode of urban governance that emerged after the 1970s economic crisis. The economic success in the US after WWII depended on a virtuous cycle of mass production and mass consumption (Jessop 2003). On the production side, the industrial sector employed most of the workforce at relatively high wages in the manufacture of standardized goods. On the consumption side, members of the labor force would spend their wages on those same standardized goods. The federal government stimulated both sides of the equation through massive spending programs that encouraged the suburbanization of urban areas and stimulated demand for housing, consumer durables, and automobiles (Florida and Jones 1991). This arrangement did not last.

Former industrial powerhouses, such as Japan and Germany, eventually recovered from the ravages of WWII, rebuilt their productive capacity, and emerged as competitors to American manufacturing. Once the productivity gaps were not enough to keep them at bay, the competitive pressure came down on labor. These developments eventually turned the virtuous cycle that had kept the economy

churning into a vicious one. Unemployment levels rose, thereby decreasing consumption and increasing, at a time of fiscal distress, the need for state assistance. Cities were hit particularly hard. Industry already had a long history of leaving old manufacturing cities in search of cheaper, non-unionized labor. International competition accelerated this trend and would eventually drive a lot of industrial production overseas. The erosion of urban manufacturing jobs and the departure or deskilling of large portions of the skilled workforce complicated the fiscal situation of cities, forcing them to address the problems associated with high unemployment even as their tax base eroded. To make matters worse, the federal initiatives that had led to massive investment in cities and created so many jobs during the post-war years had either expired or severely contracted, along with most federal aid programs. By the time the country started to emerge from the recession of the 1970s, urban economies and urban governance were in the middle of a radical transformation.

The industrial sector felt forced to overcome the rigidities of the prevailing economic system and react with more flexibility to market fluctuations. This touched off a series of changes that enabled greater capital mobility between sectors and places (Fainstein 2001). The reorganization of production involved the dis-integration and outsourcing of internal operations, as well as the negotiation of less rigid and less expensive arrangements with labor. Greater flexibility and mobility in production also required greater liquidity. And that was made possible through extensive enhancements in the coordination and capacity of the financial system (Harvey 1991).

The state played a critical role in these transformations. The economic crisis had shifted the ideological pendulum towards free-market apologists who tried to counteract the perceived failures of progressive policies with measures initially pursued out of necessity and subsequently perpetuated out of conviction. The state withdrew support from unions, pressuring them to make concessions that lowered the cost and enhanced the flexibility of production. It also stimulated liquidity through the deregulation of the financial industry. Beyond that, it implemented a regime of fiscal austerity that cut social welfare programs. Together, these policies aimed to create a “business-friendly” climate, which the state pursued in the hopes of attracting and retaining footloose capital—capital whose mobility the state itself had promoted.

The developments I have just described unfolded across all levels of government. In cities, they entailed a shift from a managerial to an entrepreneurial mode of urban governance (Harvey 1989a). If old, industrial urban centers had found themselves at the center of the economic crisis, they also found themselves at the heart of the subsequent political-economic restructuring. They had to confront the erosion of their primary economic sector at a time when federal policy encouraged deindustrialization and offered little assistance to mitigate its effects. And they had to do so in competition with other cities. Harvey identifies four major strategies at their disposal (*ibid.*): 1) They could compete within the spatial division of labor by increasing the rate of exploitation of the local workforce or by procuring improvements to the technologies and organization of production; 2) they could try to become a center for government and/or high finance activity; 3) they could try to influence, at higher levels of government, policies that might have a beneficial

redistributive effect on their region; and 4) they could compete within the spatial division of consumption by making themselves attractive to visitors and prospective residents with dollars to spend. In the next section, I will focus on the last strategy, which had the most direct impact on redevelopment policy.

### **Redevelopment Policy**

Redevelopment policy refers to the ways in which the state coordinates reinvestment in land for productive uses. The functioning of a capitalist economy requires the state to organize land resources. At the most fundamental level, the state must ensure the conditions necessary for the emergence and perpetuation of a real estate market. This provides an essential mechanism for promoting innovation and for channeling investment toward more profitable endeavors. The operation of this market depends on a series of state guarantees: the commodification of land, which allows land to be monetized; the recognition, regulation, and enforcement of property rights, which makes possible land conveyance; the institution of money, which allows the concentration of value in one time and place (Harvey 1989b); the institution of credit, which allows access to money; and finally, the codification and institutionalization of market activity and the standardization of its instruments, which ensure transactional efficiency.

The role of the state in the management of land, however, goes beyond the creation and support of a real estate market. Capitalist production also requires the regulation of land-uses and the provision of public services and infrastructure (Fainstein 1991). These interventions help overcome collective action problems and avoid incompatibilities among land uses. They also mitigate conflict between market and non-market land uses, and make possible the pursuit

of long-term social goals that might take precedence over the economic success of individual capitalists. Land is, inherently, neither a commodity nor a factor of production. More basically, land is where people exist and do whatever it is they do. It therefore plays a crucial role in social welfare. It provides a setting for habitation, recreation, and all manner of social association. Because these functions do not necessarily correspond with the interests of capitalists, the state must manage tensions that arise between the two (*ibid.*).

Redevelopment policy, then, is a state effort to encourage productive, economic land uses and to manage the problems that these may bring about. The late-century adoption of entrepreneurial modalities of urban governance entailed a transformation in urban redevelopment policy. Having lost their edge and their capacity as centers of production, cities vied with each other to capture consumer spending. Turning old industrial cities into attractive centers of consumption during a fiscal crisis was no small task. And yet, cities set out to do just that. They relied on a variety of strategies and tools. They formed public-private partnerships, devised off-budget financing strategies, and used state powers to undertake ambitious, large-scale projects; they invested in large anchor facilities, such as convention centers, stadia, and aquaria, to catalyze further development; and they spurred private development through deregulation and financial subsidies (e.g. rezonings; tax-exempt loans) (Fainstein 1991; Eisinger 2000). These growth strategies brought local government and private developers ever closer to each other and formed the basis of the urban entrepreneurial regime (Mossberger and Stoker 2001). Local government depended on developers to improve the aesthetic

profile of cities and enhance their “quality of life.” And developers stood to make a lot of money in the process.

The adoption of an entrepreneurial approach to urban governance and the emphasis on local economic development altered not only redevelopment goals and tools but also the role of planners in the redevelopment process. Cities’ retreat from managerial and regulatory planning strategies led to the contraction of planning departments and to their reorientation toward “market-based” initiatives—initiatives aimed at eliciting a reaction from the private sector through incentives or partnership arrangements (Howe 2001). Organizationally, this has involved the departmental separation of planning and economic development functions. The latter tend to reside within the mayor’s office itself or within distinct agencies or quasi public corporations often led by a business-oriented director (Teitz 2001). Operationally, these changes have resulted in an increased reliance on consultants and business methodologies to evaluate development opportunities and developer responses (Sagalyn 2007). They have also introduced developers further into the planning process, restricted planners’ scope of action, and raised the stakes at the negotiating table (*ibid.*)

The changes to the planning profession have elicited concerns among urban commentators that the dependence on profitability will lead planners to prioritize the needs of financial interests and property capital over other social goals (Barnekov et al, 1989; Leitner and Garner 1993; Peck 1995). These objections derive from a sense that planners cannot perform their proper function of restraining development if they are beholden to developers who seek to overcome

those restraints (Teitz 2001). Others scholars, however, contend that this criticism arises from a deep-seated ideological suspicion of capitalistic enterprise among urban academics (Sagalyn 2007). Despite this disagreement, both sides recognize a lack of systematic research into the risk/return and cost/benefit equations in “market based” planning initiatives (Teitz 2001; Sagalyn 2007).

This perceived need for further research aside, academic research has explored the implications of cities’ reliance on developer-led urban redevelopment and identified its resulting tendencies. This approach privileges large investment over small-scale economic activity and sweat equity. It fails to account for non-market activity that might improve local welfare (e.g., collaboration, bartering). It takes the connection between capital investment and job creation for granted, ignoring both job quality and investment that might eliminate jobs. And lastly, it prioritizes risks assumed by the developer/investor over those assumed by workers, communities, and the state (Beauregard 1993). This last point becomes especially significant in light of the risks associated with projects typical of this redevelopment strategy. Large-scale construction takes a long time, making it susceptible to changing economic conditions. Moreover, in the context of inter-urban competition, success is relative; and a project may confer an advantage on a city only until other cities copy or surpass it. These inherent dangers are exacerbated by trends and structural circumstances that increase cities’ tolerance for risk. Development-cycles are usually longer than electoral cycles. This emboldens ribbon-cutting officials to support riskier venture than they otherwise would if they expected to be in office by the time the chickens and creditors came home to roost. Other factors encouraging the aggressive determination of acceptable risk have been the

development of new project finance mechanisms and the relaxation of Wall Street underwriting standards.

Real estate is a tricky thing to finance. It is unique, immobile, and expensive; its development requires a long-term investment; and its future value depends on contextual factors that can fluctuate with time (Fainstein 2001). These features tend to suppress the interest of global finance in local real estate, thereby limiting the financing options available to ambitious projects. Several steps taken by the federal government, however, have allowed the financial sector to overcome these limitations by increasing the liquidity of real estate and transforming it into capital market securities. One was the creation of real estate mutual funds (REITs) and the subsequent loosening of restrictions on their operators and on the types of property they could own. A second was the creation of a government-sponsored secondary mortgage market—a market for the sale to institutional investors of securities derived from bundled and securitized mortgage obligations. Both innovations provided investors with the means to purchase a standardized product—a share in real estate—that allowed them to diversify their portfolio without incurring the risks otherwise associated with real estate investment (Fox Gotham, 2007).

The standardization, “deterritorialization”, and securitization of real estate depend on models that purport, despite periodic evidence to the contrary, to improve our ability to assess and manage the risk of default. To aggravate matters, the issuance and sale of real estate-backed securities depend on complex, highly profitable, commission-driven transactions that always allocate risk somewhere else. The

resulting increase in risk tolerance has made easy credit available, exacerbating the real estate market's tendency toward boom and bust cycles. During the booms, aggressive real estate activity has allowed cities to pursue ambitious redevelopment agendas by spurring on developers with subsidies and deregulation. The stimulation of development in an overheated real estate market has encouraged speculation in an already speculative environment, exacerbating the risk of market collapse and destabilizing entire neighborhoods in the process.

Speculative markets give rise to riskier projects and to more of them. Fewer projects get shelved after a sober assessment of their future prospects. To paraphrase a developer quoted by Fainstein, banks don't finance what developers want to build. Rather, developers build whenever bankers want to finance (Fainstein 2001, 67). If there is money, in other words, developers build, whether it makes sense or not. The public sector, which partners with private developers in most large-scale projects, could provide a guiding vision and impose a degree of discipline on the proceedings. But it often doesn't. For one, developers can come to dominate public-private partnerships. Furthermore, elected officials often lack either the political incentive to kill projects or the vision to predict their long-term effects. Fainstein aptly describes the recent appetite for ambitious schemes as a return to urban renewal (2005). Both resemble each other in their top-down approach, the scope of their ambition, and their disruptive effects. But they differ, crucially, in their sources of funding. During the urban renewal era, cities could count on federal moneys to see projects through. These days, a failed project mainly results in displacement, vacancies, blight, and an uncertain future (*ibid.*).

## Conclusion

The literatures reviewed in this section offer ways to understand both the role of local decision-makers in urban redevelopment and the larger political-economic context within which these local actors operate. They help explain the circumstances that can make redevelopment plans like the one in Coney Island seem viable and advisable, and they also anticipate some of the coalitions that might mobilize for or against them. These theories emphasize political and economic incentives, resources, and constraints, such as credit availability and cost, developer profit, political careers, or construction jobs. Those are certainly part of the Coney Island redevelopment story. That part, however, fails to account for claims about the historic significance of Coney Island and for urban imaginaries that have inspired development visions for the area. Grouping these under the residual Marxian category of use-value does not offer insight into their particulars. For that, I have relied instead on the set of the literatures reviewed in the following section.

## B. The Cultural Meaning of Places

This section deals with the relation between place and meaning. The first set of debates explores the origin of place-meanings. Some authors trace them back to economic processes; others, to representational practices. Yet others have tried to reconcile these two approaches and understand place-meanings in terms of an interaction between the material and the representational. A second set of works relies on these theoretical formulations to explore the significance of spatial representations in three prevalent forms redevelopment—gentrification, tourist-oriented development, and historic preservation. These literatures try to explain

why spatial representations inspire such contentiousness, informing both the promotion and opposition of development efforts.

People attach meaning to places. Those meanings are relative—one person's slum is another's heritage destination. Scholars have long argued about where those meanings come from. Do they emerge from places? Or do they precede places and help define them? This debate has evolved alongside the emergence of a relational understanding of space. The concept of relationality runs counter to the intuitive notion that places consist of areas confined by boundaries—an intuition that naturalizes those boundaries, overlooking their porosity and treating places as static things, delinked from the countless connections that define them. A relational understanding takes into account the flows of people, information, capital, and services that find articulation in places, constrained or enabled by an ever-evolving set of physical, technological, cultural, and legal structures. This insight has led geographers to define places as intersections of linkages and boundaries. A place denotes states of being (or processes of becoming) constituted by those relations, rather than a container filled with them (Massey 2005). Some theorists have focused primarily on the capitalist dynamics that produce the built environment and have treated spatial representations as byproducts of those dynamics. Others have instead emphasized the effect of representational practices, trying to understand the way in which they structure social relations. I discuss both approaches in turn.

### **The Materialist Perspective: the Productions of Space**

Some Marxist theorists understand the meaning of places first and foremost in relation to processes of material production—processes that lead to the

construction of physical settings. One of the most influential proponents of this view has been Harvey, whose work explores the spatial implications of capitalism. Harvey argues that capitalism has transformed the experience of place. He explains the transition from modernism to postmodernism, for instance, in terms of structural adjustments that followed the 1970s crisis in the Fordist regime of production and consumption (Harvey 1991). This crisis led to the emergence of a new regime of accumulation, Post-Fordism, which moved away from standardized mass production and towards customized manufacturing and short-production runs for niche markets. This shift was both a response to problems associated with the rigidities of Fordism and a response to changes in demand. The technological innovations that contributed to the economic crisis (and made possible its fix) also compressed the experience of time and space, reducing the geographic difference between places. This compression increased the importance of symbolic differentiation, altered patterns of consumption, and spurred the cultural transition towards post-modernity. Harvey does not claim explicitly that the experience of place—the subjective meaning of a place—is derived from material conditions. In fact, he does not develop a theoretical connection between cultural and economic processes, acknowledging that their simultaneity does not demonstrate causality. But the language he uses to describe the relation between them suggests otherwise (Jackson 1991). Harvey explains a cultural shift through a careful analysis of the transition between modes of capitalist accumulation, and not the other way around.

Harvey's position has found adherents among geographers who, unlike Harvey, do theorize the connection between the representational and the material construction of places, relying on the concept of landscape (see Mitchell 1996). Landscape refers

to a space constituted by an interaction between representational and material processes. For Mitchell, that interaction is mediated through labor. On the one hand, the morphology or physical form of places results from the appropriation of labor power. On the other, the ideological representation of places helps naturalize that appropriation and helps reproduce the relation between capital and labor. Unlike Harvey, Mitchell does not give one set of processes priority over the other. Like him, however, Mitchell understands both in terms of capitalist production and its requirements. In the next section, I discuss academic traditions that take a different approach. These studies of the built form de-emphasize the material production of places and focus instead on their social construction.

### **The Representational Perspective: the Social Construction of Space**

The social construction of a place refers to the social processes that mediate how a place is experienced and understood. Various forms of social exchange inscribe places with meaning. In some cases, those inscriptions may reflect prevailing cultural values—Fishman, for example, interprets early 20th century utopian urban designs as embodiments of dominant ideals of that period (Fishman 1982). But that does not make these meanings consensual. Some critics view the built environment as an outcome of cultural contestation and as an instrument of power. Following the work of Foucault, critics such as Wilson, Boyer, and Sorkin “read” places, looking for silences, equivalences, and other discursive devices by which dominant cultural agendas are advanced and others suppressed. Wilson examines the ways in which Modernist plans imprint hegemonic views of gender relations onto the built environment (Wilson 1992). Boyer sees historic tableaux in festival malls as attempts to divert attention away from the “real” city and its attendant social conflicts by promoting a sanitized vision of the past—“a mythical base on which...

moral, political, and social traditions might stand" (Boyer 1992). And Sorkin interprets Disneyland as a modernist paean to technological progress and as the expression of a small town pastoral ideal (Sorkin 1992b).

Critical work on the discursive meaning of places tends to emerge from the interpretive perspective of the researcher-observer. This neglects contributions to the generation of meaning by the users of places themselves. In the work of Sorkin and Boyer, for example, individuals are either dupes, easily manipulated by their environment for commercial ends, or anonymous profit-seeking manipulators. But where does that leave those who find fulfillment, excitement, intellectual stimulation, or aesthetic pleasure in festival malls and in Disneyland? The failure to account for such voices presents a limitation. Take, for instance, the case of an inner city neighborhood. We could understand it in terms of the values inscribed in its defensible spaces or in terms of its representation as a slum. But without a participant's perspective, we would not appreciate the ways in which that "slum" might serve as someone's workplace or home or hangout.

Researchers have studied the personal experience of place through a variety of approaches. Within the field of tourism, consumer research has explored the images that visitors associate with places by using elaborate surveys. Critics have uncharitably characterized this work as typifying "a tradition of flat-footed sociology and psychology driven by an unhappy marriage between marketing research and positivist ambitions of scientific labeling" (see Selby 2004). On a methodological level, they find fault with the absence of respondent input into the formulation of survey instruments. On a theoretical level, they argue that an

atomistic treatment of people as consumers fails to conceptualize the ways in which social relations shape personal meaning (*ibid.*).

The phenomenology-inspired work of humanistic geographers circumvents the limitations of conventional tourism research. In keeping with the phenomenological insight that the world does not pre-exist the individual who experiences it, these geographers focus their research on the subjective experience of place (Tuan and Hoelscher 2001; Relph 1984). In its purest, most Husserlian version, phenomenology strives to uncover a subject's unmediated experience, leaving no room for inter-subjectivity—failing to account for the notion that subjectivity is relationally constituted and can therefore not be divorced from its interaction with others. Less orthodox versions of phenomenology maintain that people make sense of their experiences in terms of a “stock of knowledge” gleaned from past experiences, many of which are shared within their social groups (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). In doing so, this alternative theoretical stance manages to consider the social dimension of personal experience and to understand places as both the context and product of social interaction.

### **Toward an Integrated Approach**

Theorists from different intellectual traditions have arrived at a shared understanding that the material formation and the representation of places are inextricably intertwined (Zukin 1996a; Low 1999; Mitchell 1996). Some cultural geographers and cultural critics have challenged altogether the dichotomy between these processes. Marxist critic Raymond Williams rejects Marxism's hierarchical understanding of ideational and material domains and accords little autonomy to either sphere (Williams 1978). Instead, he integrates both within the domain of

“cultural politics”—a domain where cultural meanings are constructed, negotiated, and resisted within broader hierarchical structures (Jackson 1991). These processes, these cultural practices, are material, like any other social practice. They arise out of material conditions of existence; and they have material effects. Working in a similar vein, Hall draws from Gramsci's work on cultural hegemony and resistance to argue that materiality is always invested with symbolic meaning. The consumption of objects and images is therefore always culturally encoded and subject to ongoing and politically contested re-valuation (*ibid.*; Hall 1991a, 1991b). In Williams and Hall's formulations, therefore, the distinction between material and symbolic practices has limited utility.

Despite the categorical slipperiness between materiality and representation, geographers concerned with the spatialization of capitalism have found it theoretically useful to reassert the analytic distinction between the two (Harvey 1991, Mitchell 1996). Material though representational practices may be, a representation is not a thing; it is a mediation of experience. Conversely, however symbolically encoded a material field may be, it is constituted by physical things. Mitchell warns that blurring these boundaries and ignoring the pre-discursive material world has led post-modern theorists to ignore the crucial role of labor in the production of places. From this perspective, one could not hope to understand ideological representations without taking into account their material referent. Accordingly, Mitchell's discussion of representational practices tends to refer back to the capitalist relations that these help to naturalize.

Some scholars have found the Marxist emphasis on capitalist relations too limiting and have argued that social relations and their spatial manifestations are structured along many vectors of power (Gibson-Graham 2006; Young 2002; Jacobs 1998). These may very well be implicated in the process of capitalist accumulation, but they cannot be understood as simple outcomes of that process. The work of Bourdieu has proven particularly influential among scholars hoping to expand their account of urban redevelopment beyond capitalist scripts. For Bourdieu, social fields are structured by different forms of capital, including non-material forms, such as symbolic or cultural capital. The internalization of these structures (i.e., the “habitus”) conditions the comprehension of everyday experience, shapes individual dispositions, and informs social practices (Bourdieu 1987). The concept of cultural capital—the competence to consume cultural products and make sense of social codes—has been especially salient in urban redevelopment research, since it provides a connection between symbolic value and spatial differentiation, without relying solely on capitalist categories.

### **The Meaning of Urban Redevelopment**

Urban scholars have taken an eclectic theoretical approach to examining the role of representation in urban redevelopment, treating material and representational practices as complementary components in the production and circulation of meaning, only some of which have a capitalist basis. Some ideological projects may very well arise from, and reinforce, the process of capitalist accumulation. But even those are never complete; they are always ongoing and subject to contestation. Moreover, that contestation revolves around multiple dimensions of an individual’s social identity—not merely his position within the labor-capitalist divide. The following section examines some of the ways in which scholars have relied on this

integrated conceptualization of representation to study redevelopment in the postmodern city—redevelopment that reflects the growing importance of symbolic differentiation.

### ***Gentrification***

Zukin's early work on the gentrification of SoHo complements a Neo-Marxian explanation of the spatialization of capitalism with an account of processes of cultural formation (1989). She relates the two other dialectically, rather than derive the cultural from the economic as an orthodox Marxist might. The gentrification of SoHo did not require merely capital and state assistance; it also required the cultural shift that made "loft living" desirable and that thereby transformed the image of the neighborhood. That shift involved an increase in the status of the arts, a nostalgic reappraisal of the city's lost industrial lifestyle, and the influence of 1960s non-conformist values on 1970s middle-class consumer attitudes. These developments, which were supported by a cultural industry, helped convert SoHo from an industrial district to a fashionable artistic scene and a coveted residential neighborhood. For Zukin, then, representational practices are distinct from, though related to, the process of capitalist accumulation. They have a material basis and material consequences; and these implicate a wide range of social practices, not all of which fit neatly into capitalist paradigms.

Other gentrification scholars have turned to the work of Bourdieu to study non-capitalist dimensions of social distinction. Ley, for instance, relies on the concept of cultural capital to explain the role of artists as catalysts of gentrification (Ley 2003). He argues that artists, who are typically rich in cultural capital but otherwise poor, enhance their status (or at least their self-regard) by inverting the

market valuation of places, privileging difference and “authenticity,” and rejecting the commercially successful on aesthetic grounds. In that respect, they are not unlike adolescents; with the crucial difference that they have come to hold a disproportionate influence on the desires and the imagination of the middle class (*ibid.*). If the ratio of cultural to financial capital helps explain artists’ recurring role as urban “pioneers” during the initial stages of gentrification, then the meanings that artists attach to neighborhoods through their activities help explain the representational changes that come to capture the interest of gentrifiers.

Subsequent gentrification research has focused on the relation between representational practices and the political economy. Lloyd’s case study of Chicago’s Wicker Park and Mele’s case study of the Lower East Side (LES) put forward alternative articulations of this dynamic in their efforts to explain an apparent paradox in the gentrification of artist neighborhoods: why do representations that set marginal neighborhoods in opposition to capitalist values become a source of advantage for capitalist accumulation? In the case of Wicker Park, Lloyd develops the concept of Neo-Bohemia to denote first a spiritual link between Wicker Park’s artistic congregation and traditional bohemian districts, and second, a correspondence between artists’ lifestyles and post-industrial capitalist interests (Lloyd 2010). Neo-Bohemian districts depend on artists’ ideological commitment to the primacy of the aesthetic and on their reliance on cultural distinction for the enhancement of status—a distinction achieved through the careful construction of lifestyle. The social scene that supports and results from these lifestyles facilitates the marketing and gentrification of the neighborhood. It

also emotionally rewards a creative workforce that bears the cost of its own reproduction.

In the case of the LES, Mele focuses on the strategic manipulation of representational practices by real estate and state interests (2000). After years of trying to erase the subcultural distinctiveness of the LES, these actors embraced it and reframed it as a selling point. The impetus behind this about-face originated with artists themselves, who came to the LES in search of working class authenticity and who, as their social status rose, often served as unwitting brokers between subcultural practices and both mainstream culture and the real estate industry. The shift in the representational practices concerning the LES, as well as artists' contribution to that shift, were made possible by changes in cultural attitudes (e.g., the effacement of barriers between high and low culture) and changes to the political economy (e.g., the rise of flexible production systems).

These works' focus on the representational dimension of places allows them to address some of the limitations of more materialist explanations of gentrification (see Smith 1996). The concept of uneven development, the fundamental concept behind materialist accounts, helps explain the spatial oscillations of capital, but does not give insight into their particular direction or form. It does not, in other words, explain why this neighborhood and not that one; and why this form of development and not some other. By examining the contested representational practices that promote and resist neighborhood change, the studies discussed in this section help explain their role in the production of space.

### ***Tourism Development***

The prevalence of tourist-oriented development in post-industrial cities has drawn urban scholars to study its causes and impacts (see Judd and Fainstein 1999).

Some of this work examines the ways in which efforts to “sell” the city implicate broader struggles over material and symbolic resources. Recent research by Brash and Fox Gotham provide useful and complementary frameworks for understanding the influence of representational practices in this form of development.

Brash frames his case study of Hudson Yards—an ambitious plan for the west side of midtown Manhattan—as a microcosm of a greater hegemonic project that arises from the interaction between social, political, and cultural processes (i.e., a class mobilization, neoliberal governance, and the construction of an urban imaginary) (Brash 2011). The Hudson Yards plan aimed to transform a largely industrial and low-scale residential neighborhood into a high-density, mixed-use, residential and office district, featuring a new stadium that would double as a convention center. Brash argues that this project formed part of a broader neoliberal effort to restructure the economy for the benefit of a “trans-national capitalist class” and a “professional-managerial class.” This effort was mediated by representations of the city as a corporation and as a luxury product—a place of competition, cosmopolitanism, and exclusivity—and by assertions about what it means to be a true New Yorker. These representations equated the values and interests of a post-industrial elite with those of the public at large. For Brash, the effectiveness of the hegemonic agenda he describes depended on a mutually

reinforcing dynamic between the material and representational processes that constituted it.

Hegemonic projects, however effective, always remain subject to challenge. In Fox Gotham's study of New Orleans, those challenges feature prominently throughout the development of tourism projects, alongside efforts to commodify places for consumption by visitors (Fox Gotham 2007). Fox Gotham's understanding of tourism development rejects the notion that this type of project simply descends from above, following a template and erasing local difference. In his formulation, urban tourism comprises a complex and multi-scalar matrix of economic, political, and cultural interactions. The effort to manage visitors' experience provokes disputing claims over the nature of local authenticity and attempts to legitimate particular constructions of race, class, and culture. If Brash shows how tourism projects look from above, as they reinforce, and draw impetus from, hegemonic constructions and agendas, Fox Gotham shows how it looks from below, implicating processes of social differentiation and identity formation across a wide range of groups. For both, attempts to sell visitors or residents a particular experience of place are never solely about their economic impact; they are always bound up in ideas about the meaning of places and about how individuals and groups relate to them.

### ***Historic Preservation***

Debates about place meanings can arise in connection to redevelopment projects that trigger historic preservation concerns. These debates often revolve around the question of what counts as history and the related question of whose history counts. Even among preservation proponents, disagreement over the object of

preservation abounds. The achievement of one group's heritage value can come at the expense of another's (see Reichl 1999; Chesluk 2007). The same project can therefore be at once celebrated as an embodiment of valued traditions or as an evocation of a better past, and denounced as a rejection of other valued traditions and alternative accounts of the past.

The field of historic preservation has traditionally avoided these debates, concerning itself first and foremost with the technical aspects of preservation—with the question of how to preserve (Mason and Avrami 2000). The relative stability of the norms that have governed historic preservation have allowed it to bracket the questions of what to preserve or of why it should be preserved in the first place. Rather than justify their efforts, preservationists have taken for granted the widely held sense that heritage embodies universal values—values that sometimes need safeguarding against the unrestrained forces of capitalism. The erosion of grand, universal narratives has led some of them to recognize the contingent nature of heritage and historic values (see Kaufman 2009; Mason and Avrami 2000). Far from being universal, heritage—the physical embodiment of historic value—is a cultural construction that legitimates social groups and contributes to their reproduction by reference to the past (Wallace 1986; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). It is the construction of heritage, and not its inherent value, that gives rise to notions of identity and to a sense of what it means to belong to particular communities.

The reformulation of heritage as contingent has had important theoretical implications for historic preservation. If history is merely a legitimating narrative

subject to ongoing challenge and revision, then there is neither an obvious standard to guide the practice of preservation nor an obvious moral imperative to justify it. Rather than arresting change, historic preservation becomes itself a form of development—a way of constructing places in ways that advance the values of certain groups instead of others. This conception of historic preservation implies a dialectical understanding of the relation between the representational and the material. Historic places—and all places—matter because of the various, often-competing meanings that different groups and individuals ascribe to them. But it is the materiality of places that makes the construction and contestation of those meanings possible (Pearce 2000).

Critics have lamented the failure of preservation practice to account for the multiplicity of meanings that inhere in the built environment—a failure that has limited its ability to address the desires that inspire heritage concerns (Kaufman 2003). Some attribute this shortcoming to inherent limitations in preservation's administrative approach, which requires architectural reference points (Costonis 1989, 87). Within heritage studies, however, the emphasis on materiality—as either a proper focus or an inherent limitation—has come under wide criticism (Crouch 2010; Jones and Yarrow 2013). Foregrounding both the discursive and experiential dimension of heritage, scholars cast materiality as, at best, a partial explanation for heritage value (Cresswell and Hoskins 2008) and at worst a spurious one (Smith 2006). The work of Laurajane Smith offers a broad and representative critique of mainstream preservation and its discursive practices (i.e., “authorized heritage discourse” [AHD]).

Smith understands AHD as a longstanding hegemonic project that privileges, on the one hand, technical and aesthetic expertise and, on the other, grand narratives of nation and class in the service of instilling values that reinforce national identities. This results in a preservation approach that disconnects heritage sites from present-day concerns and leaves to experts the assessment and management of built structures. Theoretically, critics challenge the tendency of AHD to define heritage value as something that inheres in physical objects, conceptualizing it instead as the negotiated outcome of an encounter among people and places (Crouch 2010; Cresswell and Hoskins 2008; Poria 2010). Normatively, they fault AHD for reinforcing the marginalization of subordinate groups and suppressing voices that dissent from official heritage narratives. (Smith 2006; Waterton and Smith 2010).

The study of heritage as a political process that implicates collective identities is theoretically grounded in post-structuralist thought. Heritage research with this orientation focuses on the discursive dimension of place, shedding light on the representational practices through which place-meanings are constructed, typically in furtherance of dominant values and groups (Urry 2002; Morgan and Pritchard 1998). This approach has been complemented in recent years by research centered on the experiential dimension of place. This work arises from a sense that discursive effects alone do not offer a full account of the work that heritage does. For that, one must examine heritage in all its ethnographic complexity and treat it as an ongoing interaction (Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Cresswell and Hoskins 2008; Jones and Yarrow 2013; Poria 2010). From this perspective, heritage value is not something that inheres in structures, but rather the result of a discursive *and*

*embodied* engagement with the past (Delyser 1999; Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Crouch 2010; Smith 2006).

In the case of both AHD and its critics, the notion of community lies at the heart of the heritage enterprise. The literature on heritage, however, eschews the conceptualization of heritage that pervades AHD, arguing that it de-politicizes what is a contested social process, results in the misrecognition of heritage stakeholders and obscures power dynamics among and within communities, in favor of expert pronouncements (Smith 2006; Waterton and Smith 2010). Critics of AHD advance an alternative conceptualization that accounts for the diverse power-laden social relations that constitute communities. Nonetheless, they do retain the concept of community in their theorization of heritage (Crouch 2010; Smith 2006; Waterton and Smith 2010). Encapsulating this perspective, Smith explains that “material culture as heritage is assumed to provide a physical representation and reality to the ephemeral and slippery concept of ‘identity’. Like history, it fosters the feeling of belonging and continuity (Lowenthal 1985, 214), while its physicality gives these feelings an added sense of material reality” (Smith 2006, 48).

The assumption that heritage always entails a negotiation of collective identity can confound this process in several ways. First, the effort to fit any group brought together by heritage concerns under the umbrella of community risks confusing effect for cause whenever the concerns are what provoke the collective mobilization in the first place. Second, an expansive formulation of the concept can erode its explanatory power. In order to account for the diverse phenomena associated with

an affinity for heritage, the concept of community would have to somehow encompass motivations well removed from group identification (such as, for instance, a sensual proclivity for an aesthetic of the past [Kitson and McHugh 2014]). Such broadness would render the concept less an explanation than something to explain. And third, while a narrower conception of community may avoid the foregoing pitfalls, it does so at the cost of excluding from its interpretive lens heritage claims from individuals lacking a relevant group affiliation.

The encounters and engagements that first generate the intensity of feeling associated with heritage sites may very well be organized around identity and community (Waterton and Watson 2014). One might anticipate as much, since heritage always has to be someone's. But who is to say whether those categories best describe the encounters and engagements that subsequently shape a site's heritage value? Viewing heritage controversies from the outset through the prism of community runs the risk of misrecognizing both stakeholders and their stake in the matter. It may also lead to a skewed assessment of the social, cultural, and political effects of heritage.

Like the tourism development literature, scholarship on historic preservation discuss points beyond the economics of development projects in an effort to grasp their full significance to affected communities and to the public at large. All forms of development have cultural significance to some groups and individuals. What sets historic preservation and tourist-oriented projects apart is the breadth of that significance. Because these projects consist of explicit efforts to manipulate, reinforce, undermine, or simply profit from the meanings of place, they often give

rise to public debate about what those meanings entail and about how they are experienced. In doing so, they offer opportunities to observe the relation between development, representational practices, and embodied experience, and to thereby explore the nature of people's connection to places.

## **Conclusion**

Some of the debates that surrounded the redevelopment of Coney Island arose from obvious motivations, such as jobs or profit. Others, however, had more elusive sources. The literatures reviewed in this section help us trace these debates back to a variety of neighborhood qualities that, though related to a commonly recognized local history, were differently understood by the City and by the advocates. They also allow us to make sense of the debates between these groups as part of the social construction of Coney Island and to relate that process to the material practices that shaped its redevelopment.

## **C. Planning Conflict**

This section examines ways of conceptualizing planning conflict. It first focuses on efforts to theorize conflict resulting from redevelopment efforts shaped by market-driven rationales. The discussion covers two predominant approaches for doing so, one emerging out of neoclassical economic theory and the other out a political economy tradition. The section then looks at an alternative set of strategies that conceptualize planning conflict as encounters among divergent theoretical frameworks.

## **Market-oriented Planning**

Market-oriented planning supplanted Modernist planning as the dominant planning approach during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Albrechts 1991; Leitner 1990, Sagalyn 1997). Modernist planning, in ideal form, consists of the application of a singular technical rationality grounded in a positivist belief in the possibility of access to truth. Truth, as revealed by the accumulation of scientific knowledge constitutes the singular criterion for identifying the optimal link between knowledge and action. In this view, plans improve in quality to the extent that planners approximate objective reality through empirical observation.

The presumption of a singular reality means that any representation on which a plan relies will be either more or less accurate. In practice, this pursuit of accuracy often entailed the exclusion of that which could not be captured along an objective measure and the devaluation of forms of knowledge that arise outside of a scientific tradition.<sup>4</sup> This inspired criticism that optimal plans were not optimal for everyone, because they ignored, underestimated, misunderstood, or obscured critical facts. Such criticism, in other words, objected to the dominant way of understanding the relation between places and planning goals (i.e. its planning rationality). This objection was fundamentally neither factual nor interpretive. It was a disagreement over values and over which facts count in support of particular planning goals.

Much of the criticism of modernist planning called for the decentralization of the planning process (Davidoff 2003; Forester 1988; Healey 2006; Sagalyn 2007).

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that planning relied on positivist epistemologies in the service of dominant agendas is a matter of historical circumstance. The work of Elvyn Wyly makes the case for the radical potential of positivism (2011).

Some of it became intertwined with a growing skepticism regarding the ability of the state to manage urban development (Beauregard 1998).<sup>5</sup> The declining faith in government's capacity to operate as efficiently as the private sector validated and further encouraged a transition away from a managerial (rationalist) to an entrepreneurial (market-based) approach to governance (Harvey 1989a; Peck and Tickell 2003; *ibid.* 2007). While this transition unfolded neither evenly nor unchallenged, it increasingly led to the ascendancy of market logics in the work of government and planning.

Market rationality rests on the possibility of maximizing utility. Market rationality refers to a belief, grounded in neoclassical economic theory, that market mechanisms provide the most efficient method for achieving society's goals, with utility maximization serving as the governing criterion. This belief depends on the notion that individual preferences—however indiscernible they might otherwise be—manifest themselves through market transactions. As a result, price signals, the expression of individual preferences, ultimately lead to the allocation of resources that brings the greatest possible satisfaction to the greatest number. The decentralized basis of markets presented planning with an opportunity to renew its claims to value-neutrality.

The ascendancy of market rationality, however, did not eliminate conflict from planning. While market mechanisms are meant to provide a neutral way of

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<sup>5</sup> There is nothing inherently statist about modernist planning. One can envision modernist plans being originated, promoted, and executed by private interests. As it happened, however, the signature planning efforts of the period in the U.S. (e.g., urban renewal and highway construction) became associated with federal policy and with technocratic public management at a local level (Sagalyn 2007; Harvey, 1989a), and not with the private agents who participated in their formulation and implementation (Weiss 1980).

negotiating the diversity that modernism sought to suppress, they do so through the imposition of a singular rationality that itself met with resistance. There are two prevalent explanations for the emergence of conflict within the logic of the market. One, the notion of externalities, views conflict as a market imperfection—a failure of pricing mechanisms to maximize utility. Because it retains the assumptions and logic of market rationality, however, it offers little insight into the role of disparate values in bringing about conflict. The other explanation, the use value/exchange value dichotomy, comes from a political economy perspective yet remains within the logic of market rationality, failing to conceptualize the indeterminate relation between different types of value and defining use values in terms of what they are not (i.e., exchange value). I summarize these limitations below and, in the subsequent section, explore the notion of conflicting rationalities as illustrated by controversies in the redevelopment of Coney Island.

### **Externalities**

In the terminology of neoclassical economic theory, externalities refer to costs or benefits from market transactions that accrue to those who had no influence over either. Within the neoclassical market framework, externalities are problematic. Markets can maximize collective utility and allocate resources efficiently only if prices reflect actual costs and benefits to those who engage in market transactions. The failure of price signals to accurately reflect total costs and benefits gives rise to perverse incentives and undesirable results, specifically the overproduction of negative externalities and the underproduction of positive ones, neither resulting in maximized utility. Regulatory solutions to this problem could involve a fee or subsidy that approximates, respectively, the negative or positive externality in question. Measures such as these, however, do not respond dynamically to market

signals. For that reason, the preferred neoclassical solution consists of the internalization of externalities into market transactions by transforming non-market values into market values. A prominent example of this practice would be the efforts to mitigate industrial pollution through the creation of a market for emissions.

Market solutions to externalities suffer from several limitations. At an operational level, the quantification of values often proves elusive. In some instances, the challenge is methodological, concerning externalities that resist easy quantification. In others, it is normative, concerning externalities that some feel should not be quantified. Beyond operational limitations, however, market solutions to externalities face a conceptual challenge. The boundaries of the market must always lie somewhere. As a result, even if you internalize an externality, there will still remain values that spill beyond the redrawn boundaries of a market transaction. In short, market transactions *always* have externalities. These effects, which are excluded as a matter of convention or law, may be diffuse, hard to anticipate, and hard to quantify; but they are always there.

Because the idea of externality is fully contained within the logic of market rationality, it cannot support an understanding of conflict as a conflict among rationalities. The notion of externalities is useful in that it helps us identify values that overflow a market exchange; but neoclassical economic theory does not have much to say about them. It ignores them or treats them as unfortunate, unconsidered, or unanticipated byproducts of the market, conceptualizing them in terms of what they are not—market values. The concept of externalities does not

allow us to consider values that arise independently of market value. It also does not help us understand the complex relationships among non-market values or between those values and market values.

### **Use Value and Exchange Value**

Critical scholars view the market not as a self-contained system but as a set of transactions embedded within a broader set of social relations. To conceptualize the relation of the market to the political economy, they rely on the binary concepts of use value/exchange value (Harvey 1978; Krueckeberg 1995; Logan and Molotch 2007). Exchange value is value of something in the market. Use value, by contrast, refers to the utility of something, *independent* of its market value. Use values can have a variety of aspects (e.g., spiritual, aesthetic, material, social). Within the neoclassical framework, exchange value is a function of use value, because the latter is expressed through aggregate demand. Political economy scholarship, however, stipulates no theoretical relation between the two concepts (Fainstein 2001); so neither concept tells you anything about the other. The disjunction between these frameworks arises from differences in their understanding of markets. In neoclassical theory, markets explain behavior, and divergences from the market ideal (e.g., extra-market phenomena, such as politics) represent distortions or inefficiencies. In the study of political economy, markets themselves require explanation, and “extra-market” phenomena provide the conditions for the existence of markets (Swanson 1993). From this perspective, exchange value could not possibly explain use value, because both are social products emerging from distinct sets of social relations (Logan and Molotch 2007).

Logan and Molotch (2007) rely on the use value/exchange value formulation in their influential work on urban development conflict. Use values here arise from our complex relationship to our surroundings (i.e., our material, spiritual, psychological, and social connection to land and to those around us). Exchange values arise, on the one hand, from a political struggle over the commodification of use value and, on the other, from speculation about the outcome of that struggle. In Logan and Molotch's final analysis, places are constituted by the pursuit of the use values and exchange values of land, and they are shaped by the "inherent" contradiction between these two forms of value (2007, 2). By treating use values and exchange values as inherently contradictory, however, this approach does not help us understand the contingent and dynamic relation between the two—the extent to which context determines the articulation of that relation.<sup>6</sup>

Use values and exchange values are neither inherently contradictory nor inherently reinforcing (Swanson 1993). The realization of use values could hinge either on their commodification or on the suppression of exchange values. Conversely, the maximization of exchange values could require the nurturing of certain use values and the inhibition of others. Since values are not things, but temporary outcomes of ongoing relations, it is misleading to think of them as a pre-existing array of embryonic units awaiting the realization of their potential. It is not as if there are 10 potential units of use value of which we may only realize five if we want to also maximize our 10 units of exchange value. Rather, the social relations that produce use value and exchange value intersect in complex ways. The process of commodification may generate use value, it may do the opposite, or it may do

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of use and exchange value in terms of a broader theoretical critique of Logan and Molotch's growth machine thesis, see Lake 1990; Cox 1991; and Fainstein 1991. For an overview of theoretical and empirical debates on the matter, see Jonas and Wilson 1999.

neither. The concept of rationalities helps us understand these processes and the ways in which they can exceed the simple dichotomy of the market and its other.

### **Means, Rationalities, and Goals: Alternative approaches**

Planning conflict can arise from an encounter among divergent rationalities. By planning, I mean the practice of connecting forms of knowledge with forms of action in the public domain (Friedmann 1987). By rationality, I mean a way of selecting the optimal connection between means and goals, given the available information.<sup>7</sup> We can speak of multiple rationalities because there are multiple ways of optimizing that connection. This diversity stems from the fact that people subscribe to different values and therefore have different ways of understanding the world and of developing those understandings. As a result, disagreements over planning goals do not merely concern the content of those goals, but also relate to the criteria for formulating and selecting among methods for their pursuit. A coherent set of those criteria constitutes a rationality. Redevelopment plans grounded in divergent rationalities view and represent places differently, and thus diverge from each other in ways that a positivist committed to the idea of a singular, objective reality would struggle to disentangle.

Urban scholars have used a variety of concepts to examine the politics of spatial representation and the ways in which divergent ideas about place engender conflict. The Lefebvrian notion of “projects” refers to the process by which social

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<sup>7</sup> The extensive literature of rationality spans across several disciplines. Planning scholars have developed a variety of typologies to understand the applicability of various forms of rationality to planning practice (see Alexander 2000, and Albrechts 2003), distinguishing primarily between instrumental rationalities and communicative rationality. The former, discussed influentially in the work of Max Weber (1922), concerns itself with the link between knowledge and action. The latter, which emerges from the work of Jürgen Habermas (1981), deals with the quality of deliberative interaction and the extent to which communication is unconstrained and undistorted. As is apparent from my definition, my paper deals exclusively with the former.

relations inscribe themselves in space, producing space (Lefebvre 1992; 2003) in furtherance of particular social agendas (“spatial projects” [Castells 1985] and “state projects” [Scott 1999]).<sup>8</sup> “Urban imaginaries” describe collective sets of meanings about cities that inform the material practices that shape urban space (Zukin et al. 1998; Greenberg 2008; Brash 2011). Within a rich body of literature in human geography, “landscape” denotes the symbolic systems that mediate our understanding of the world, rendering places both a reflection of social relations as well as a means for their reproduction (Duncan and Ley 1993; Mitchell 1996; Duncan 2005). Finally, “frames” refer to ways of organizing reality to provide guideposts for knowing (Rein and Schon 1993) and have provided a way to study the intersection between social and place identities (Kaufman 1999; Martin 2003; Pierce, Martin, and Murphy 2011). These notions overlap conceptually and in their application. Any of them could help examine how planning divergent place-images produces conflict on the ground. I rely instead on the notion of rationalities, first, because it easily accommodates (since they are part of its definition) the concepts of means and goals, which have offered a common language in the planning literature for discussing the planning process (Altshuler 1966; Etzioni 1967; Friedmann 1987; Lindblom 1959), and second, because the notion of rationalities also forms part of the theoretical underpinnings of market-oriented planning and helps situate conflict both *within* the terms of market rationality and *in* the practice of market rationality.

## Conclusion

The literatures covered in this section offer a variety of ways to study planning conflict that go beyond disagreement over planning goals. They allow us to

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<sup>8</sup> See Madden 2014 for an overview of the two.

make sense of how divergent logics for assessing the connection between means and ends can lead to multiple conceptions of place, of development, and of the relation between the two. The most common ways of understanding those differences suffer from limitations. The notion of externalities looks beyond market values but has little to say about what lies beyond the market, other than identifying its exteriority. The use value/exchange value binary offers a common way of understanding those differences. It fails, however, to contemplate the many ways in which use values, in their variety, might relate to market values and to each other, depending on the context. A third alternative, which comprises a variety of analogous conceptual formulations, can account for the multiple inter-related rationalities that come to bear on a redevelopment project. This approach helps us see how diverse understandings of place originate and come into conflict with one another, as well as how they evolve throughout the planning process, even as they shape it.

## **D. Conclusion**

This chapter brought together three sets of literature. The first dealt with urban governance and described the rise both of Neoliberalism as its dominant mode and of an entrepreneurial approach to planning as a way of determining and pursuing urban redevelopment goals. This approach privileges the expertise, methodologies, and practices of the private sector as it seeks to enhance the value of land uses within city boundaries. The second body of scholarship dealt with place-meanings and covered a range of debates that conceptualize these as resulting from an interaction between material and representational processes. Studies of gentrification, tourism-oriented development, and historic

preservation all trace this interaction in an effort to shed light on the conflicts that arise in these development contexts. The third set of literature offered a variety of ways for making sense of such conflict as it unfolds throughout the planning process, and it provided an analytic vocabulary for doing so—a vocabulary of means, goals, and rationalities that can account for the relation between the place and the plan.

I rely on these literatures in this project to study how SCI and the City understood Coney Island; how those understandings related to their respective development visions; and why those visions came into conflict. In the case of the City, my starting point is the administration's well-documented approach to planning and urban redevelopment—a variation on approaches closely associated with Neoliberalism. From there, I examine how the fairly typical redevelopment plan that resulted from this approach related to the meanings that the City ascribed to the neighborhood. With SCI, I take the opposite tack, studying first the advocates' attachment to Coney Island to then make sense of both their opposition to the City's plan and their own development ideas. I then use the notion of planning rationalities to characterize the logic that held together the groups' perspectives and to explain the clash between them.

## VIII. Prologue: KeySpan Park

The first major Coney Island redevelopment plan in decades got its initial spark in 1998 for reasons that had little to do with the neighborhood: the search for a site to accommodate a minor league baseball stadium. That search led the City to Coney Island, where a stretch of public land, the former home of the famed Steeplechase Park, lay vacant and ready for development, pending public approval of the project.

The idea of bringing a minor league stadium to Coney Island originated with Mayor Giuliani in 1998. It arose in connection with a minor league stadium that the City hoped to build in Staten Island. Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari had expressed interest for almost a decade in attracting a minor league franchise to his borough (Barry 1998a). Giuliani, who owed his mayoral victories in no small measure to the Republican constituency in Staten Island (Roberts 1993), wanted to reward his political ally, Molinari, and promised city funds to help him build the facility. He also offered to help broker a deal for the minor league home team with the Yankees organization, with whose owner Giuliani, a prominent Yankees fan, had a close relationship.

The administration's plan faced a potential obstacle. Pursuant to contractual terms among Major League Baseball (MLB) teams, any team reserves the right to block the location of an affiliated minor league team that falls within its territory. Since Staten Island falls within the territory of the Mets, a Yankees franchise would require its approval. City officials should have expected a ready objection by the

Mets, seeing that just one year prior the Yankees had dashed the Mets' hopes of locating one of its own minor league franchises in Long Island (Newman 1998).

To overcome the Met's opposition, Giuliani approached the team's owner, Fred Wilpon, with an irresistible offer, a chance to bring baseball back to Brooklyn.<sup>9</sup> He offered to build Wilpon a Brooklyn stadium for a Mets minor league affiliate if he allowed a Yankees franchise in Staten Island. With negotiations under way, the Mayor asked EDC to identify a site for the second stadium. EDC found Coney Island (Barry 1998b). Once the Yankees and the Mets had informally accepted the City's offer of a \$20m stadium a piece, the City's Franchise and Concession Review Committee, four of whose members were mayoral appointees, voted 5-1 in favor of granting the Mets exclusive negotiating rights for the development and management of the minor league stadium slated for Coney Island. The one dissenting vote came from Howard Golden, the Brooklyn Borough President (BBP) (Liff 1998b).

Before proceeding, the City's plan would need to undergo a public review process involving the BBP, the local community board (CB), CB 13, the City Planning Commission (CPC), and eventually City Council. Golden, who had historically had a contentious relationship with Mayor Giuliani, had not been involved in any of the negotiations with the Mets (Liff 1998a). While he had long championed the idea of bringing baseball back to Brooklyn, he opposed the proposed Mets farm team from the outset, arguing that Brooklyn was a "major league town" (Newman 1998). He also maintained that granting exclusive negotiating rights to teams affiliated with

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<sup>9</sup> The departure in 1957 of the borough's last baseball franchise, the Brooklyn Dodgers, and the demolition of its stadium in 1960 is carved into the psyche of many a Brooklyn sports fan, including, presumably, Wilpon.

MLB was a bad deal for the City. The short-season Single-A team proposed by the Mets in order to avoid competition with its major league operation would play far fewer home games than teams in leagues unaffiliated with MLB might have (Liff 1998c), thus reducing the entertainment value and economic impact of the stadium. Independent franchises would also not have been subject to MLB's territorial rights, a major source of leverage for the Mets and the Yankees in their negotiations.

Beyond the question of league level, Golden opposed the City's plan out of fear that it would derail a project that he had long championed, the Sportsplex — an amateur sport arena first proposed for the old Steeplechase site by the Brooklyn Sports Foundation (BSF) during the late 1980s. During much of the 1990s, the BSF had promoted the Sportsplex throughout Brooklyn, securing a \$67 million financing commitment from the City, the State, and the BBP's Office (Martin 1998). The BSF, however, never approached the City with fully developed plans for the facility, and by the end of the decade, the administration had come up with its own ideas for the site.

CB 13, half of whose members were Golden appointees, shared the BBP's commitment to the Sportsplex and joined the BBP and the BSF in their opposition to the stadium. When the project came under review, members expressed a belief that the Sportsplex, and not the stadium, would generate local jobs and constitute a centerpiece for the economic revitalization of the neighborhood (Barnes 1999). During the CB 13 hearings, EDC officials tried to assure the board that the stadium would neither preclude the arena nor appropriate its funds, and that it

would leave enough room on the site for its future construction. In the end, though, EDC's assurances did not suffice. CB 13 voted overwhelmingly against the ballpark unless the City agreed to build it concurrently with the Sportsplex (Liff 1999a, 1999b). Once rejected by CB 13, the project came under the review of the BBP whose negative vote was not long in coming (Liff 2000).

The City was never convinced of the advisability of building a Sportsplex in Coney Island. Having reaped the political value of a \$30 million commitment to the project, it did not necessarily want the arena to happen. City officials harbored doubts that the arena, given its peripheral location, would attract enough large events to warrant its size and expense. Furthermore, coordinating the construction of the Sportsplex, the plans for which remained at a conceptual stage, with that of the stadium would have delayed the completion of both facilities until after the expiration of Mayor Giuliani's term. For these reasons, the City insisted during the City Council review that the Sportsplex should not delay the stadium, even as it offered guarantees that the arena project would proceed at some point in the future.

After some negotiation, the City managed to secure City Council approval in exchange for a series of concessions. The Mayor promised to support the Sportsplex if the head of BSF, a Golden ally, stepped down from his position. He also agreed, in order to sway Councilman Berman, the Chair of the Brooklyn Caucus and of the Finance Committee, to undertake \$30 million in improvements to the area surrounding the stadium<sup>10</sup> and to form a development corporation made

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<sup>10</sup> The improvements, some of which had been in the budget for over ten years without ever receiving priority consisted of: the restoration of the landmarked Parachute Jump; the installation of twenty beach volley ball courts and of several playgrounds, shade pavilions, lifeguard stands, and

up of community representatives appointed by the Mayor and by the City Council (but not by the BBP) to, depending on one's perspective, oversee the completion of the Sportsplex or reevaluate its advisability (Edozien 2000). Berman did not require much convincing to support the stadium. He was running for city controller the following year and stood to benefit politically not only from Giuliani's support, but from coming across as the person who brokered the stadium deal—the person who made baseball happen in Brooklyn.<sup>11</sup> Despite having strongly supported the Sportsplex in the past, Berman adopted the administration's party line. With Berman and the Brooklyn delegation behind the Mayor's deal, few council members stood to gain by opposing what was now a \$91 million Coney Island redevelopment plan—\$31 million for the stadium,<sup>12</sup> \$30 million for the Sportsplex, and \$30 million for general improvements. On April 12, 2000, City Council approved the stadium proposal 48 to 1 (Metro News Brief 2000).

In preparation for the opening of the stadium, the City did a thorough cleanup of the area, sweeping sidewalks, removing brush, and painting over graffiti, giving the stretch from Stillwell Station to the stadium an unrecognizably sanitary appearance. The City also cracked down on flea market vendors who operated along Surf Avenue in violation of the district's zoning. These vendors were the only merchants willing to work in this area, and their outdoor bazaars catered to the

comfort stations; and the creation of both a small pedestrian plaza linking Stillwell Avenue to the Boardwalk and a new parking facility a couple of blocks west of the stadium.

<sup>11</sup> As a further incentive, Berman would receive later that year a \$54,000 campaign contribution from the Mets organization (Robbins 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Although originally estimated at \$20 million, this figure rose steadily throughout the process. By the time CB 13 voted on the project, the cost had risen to \$31 million, \$7 million of which consisted of unspecified "off-site improvements." By early 2000, the total cost had risen to \$39 million. Various factors contributed to this increase. First, both the Yankees and the Mets compared the terms of their agreements repeatedly and demanded further concessions to ensure that each was getting at least as good a deal as the other. Second, the rushed schedule also played a factor. The effort to finish the stadium in time for the 2001 season cost an extra \$8 million (Robbins 2000).

many low-income residents in the neighborhood. By June 2001, none remained (Denson 2002, 279-281).

On June 25, 2001, the Mayoral parade marched down an immaculate Surf Avenue to celebrate the opening of Coney Island's new stadium and the return of baseball to the borough. To judge by ticket sales and game attendance over the first few seasons, this return was a success. Most games sold out, and the franchise broke records in its league for attendance. In some seasons, the Cyclones sold over 300,000 tickets, a threshold that no other team at this level had ever broken.<sup>13</sup> In 2001, Cyclones merchandise outsold all minor league franchises in the United States but one (Newman 2001), and its baseball cap outsold all MLB baseball caps but one (that of the Seattle Mariners) (Miller 2001). And yet, despite the Cyclone's apparent success, seasons passed without the anticipated neighborhood-wide development ever materializing.

The Sportsplex, the second part of the City's redevelopment initiative, never formally died; but the activity surrounding the stadium robbed it of political momentum. While the BBP and the Giuliani administration kept their pledged contribution to the Sportsplex in their respective budgets, the State and Giuliani's successor, Mayor Bloomberg, made no such assurances. Brooklyn officials, for their part, remained noncommittal, preferring to defer to the evaluations of the body conceived to oversee the project—the CIDC (Sederstrom 2004). Giuliani intended to announce the formation of the CIDC in the fall of 2001, a few months after the completion of KeySpan Park, but the September 11 attacks disrupted his

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<sup>13</sup> Dave Campanaro (Brooklyn Cyclones Communications Director), personal communication, 2003.

plans, and the Mayor's term concluded without the administration leaving a development corporation in place.

## **IX. The City (Part I)**

Before beginning the story of the Bloomberg administration's redevelopment efforts in Coney Island, this chapter introduces the administration and presents its assessment of conditions in the neighborhood.

### **A. Who Was the City?**

Writing about the City as a unitary entity inevitably summons longstanding debates about the nature of the state and about the nature of governance that are not a central concern of this project. To make better sense of the planning controversy in Coney Island, however, one needs to first understand how planning happens in New York City and, specifically, how it happened during the Bloomberg administration. This section discusses the leading individuals behind the plan for Coney Island, locating them within a planning context that scholars have characterized in terms of planning tendencies in New York City during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After briefly describing the institutional structure of local government, I offer an overview of local planning priorities and prevalent planning modalities in recent decades. I then discuss the key figures who shaped planning policy under the Bloomberg administration, the development agenda that they pursued, and the means they used to implement it.

Institutionally, planning in New York City resembles planning in most large American cities. Municipal governments derive their powers from the state. Home rule allows them to exercise authority over land use matters, provided they do so in

furtherance of general security, health, safety, morals, and welfare. The mayor's office assumes the executive function in the dispensation of these powers and the City Council, which consists of representatives from every district in the city, assumes the legislative functions. Beyond that, New York has a president in each borough who is elected by borough residents and who has limited executive powers. It also has community boards, the member of which are appointed by the borough president and by the district's council member, in each of the fifty-nine community districts into which the city is divided. Both the borough president and the community boards vote on land use decisions. Their vote, however, is only advisory and not binding.

The city's budget depends predominantly on tax revenues generated within municipal boundaries (Fainstein 2001, 85), which creates an incentive for the retention of tax-paying residents and businesses, especially during periods of fiscal constraints. This structural feature led to a political realignment during the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s. In an effort to avert New York City's bankruptcy, New York State created a series of agencies dominated by business interests and charged with overseeing the municipal budget (Moody 2007; Fitch 1996; Tabb 1982). This administrative layer imposed a regime of fiscal austerity that would persist, alongside a move toward devolution, deregulation, and privatization in local policy making, even after local government regained fiscal autonomy. This development was bolstered by a concurrent ideological shift that privileged market-led economic initiatives over redistributive measures (Fainstein 2001, 95).

The influence of business interests in setting New York City's development agenda—a longstanding tendency in local government (Fitch 1996)—gained renewed impetus in the aftermath of the fiscal crisis, as federal urban policy making waned and as the City sought ways to foster a “business friendly” environment to support existing employers and to keep its tax base from decamping to competing municipalities (Moody 2007; Fitch 1996; Tabb 1982). This led to a reorientation of planning priorities and transformed the role of planning in the management of urban affairs. By this point, popular opposition and fiscal constraints had dealt a double blow to ambitious public-led development initiatives and comprehensive planning efforts (Larson 2013, chapter 4). In their stead, planning assumed the scattershot form of isolated, uncoordinated projects, united mainly by the overarching goal of making the city desirable to businesses in growing sectors of the economy. This goal drove not just the City's policy agenda but also the formulation of one of the few long-term comprehensive plans ventured during this period, *A Region at Risk* (Yaro and Hiss 1996). Authored in 1996 by the Regional Plan Association, a not-for-profit planning organization, this plan looks back at the early 90s recession and reacts to a perceived threat of further economic and demographic decline. In order to arrest this downward trajectory, it issues a series of recommendations aimed at addressing the needs of white collar and creative industries. These include strategies for transforming physical aspects of the city so as to enhance quality of life and better retain and lure a skilled professional workforce (Larson 2013, chapter 5). Many of these recommendations would resurface a few years later as centerpieces of the Bloomberg administration's planning program.

Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire businessman and political neophyte, ran for mayor as a republican, having just prior to his run switched partisan affiliation. His improbable election resulted in part from the staggering sum he spent on his campaign and from a bruising Democratic primary that left his opponent without the support of unified party base (Moody 2007, chapter 5). Kim Moody best captures Bloomberg's political inclinations as that of "a 'corporate liberal' in the time of the neoliberal — a social liberal with a businessman's trust in the market and a bent for private-public partnerships over public provision" (ibid., 158) At the time of his election, he had long been a well-connected member of the city's business elite and deeply invested in the financial industry, which had come to play the preeminent role in the local economy (ibid., 159). Bloomberg presented himself during the election and throughout his administration as a politician above politics, a self-made billionaire un beholden to donors and qualified for office by virtue of the managerial acumen and pragmatic judgment that his business accomplishments demonstrated (ibid.; Brash 2011, 3). His approach to urban governance, however, would turn out to be profoundly ideological.

Anthropologist Julian Brash characterizes Bloomberg governance approach as a form of neoliberalism distinguished by aggressive entrepreneurial efforts to stimulate real estate and to cater to both corporate business interests and their skilled-workforce (Brash 2011).

We'll continue to transform New York physically — giving it room to grow for the next century — to make it even more attractive to the world's most talented people.... New York is the city where the world's best and brightest want to live and work. That gives us an unmatched competitive

edge—one we'll sharpen with investments in neighborhoods, parks and housing.<sup>14</sup>

Brash regards Bloomberg's mode of governance as a deeply spatial class project in which the physical transformation of the city reinforces and reflects two class formations—that of corporate executives and that of professionals. In his view, the retention of these classes and of the capital they embody has long been a priority in neoliberal urban regimes. Consequently, so has been the shaping of the urban environment to accommodate the cultural preferences and economic interests of these groups (Brash 2011, 14). According to Brash, the Bloomberg administration adopted these priorities; but it also pursued an additional way of advancing elite class interests. It politically mobilized these classes as active participants in local government, rendering the City's planning agenda one not just for postindustrial elites, but also by them (Brash 2011, 19-21). The administration rationalized and furthered this agenda through the promotion of two urban imaginaries. The first envisioned the city as a corporation, a discrete operation to be branded and marketed as it vies with rivals for residents and visitors, whom it regards as clients. The second casts the city as a place of luxury defined by reference to the experiences and class identity of the elite (i.e., "the best and the brightest"). Together, these imaginaries helped mediate the social and political transformation that the Bloomberg administration's urban policy strived to effect.

Mayor Bloomberg assigned several key posts in his administration to individuals who traveled in similar elite circles. Two of them played critical roles in shaping the Mayor's planning agenda: Dan Doctoroff, the Deputy Mayor for Economic

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Bloomberg, 2003 State of the City Address, January 23, as quoted in Busà 2013.

Development and Rebuilding, and Amanda Burden, the Director the Department of City Planning. Doctoroff, a fellow billionaire who made his fortune in finance, became invested in New York City urban development politics when he launched and led the City's bid for the 2012 Olympics. For NYC 2012, he assembled a team of prominent real estate and local planning figures and charged them with formulating a plan for the bid (Brash 2011, 51). The resulting plan set forth an ambitious program that included projects that had long languished on the wish list of local real estate elites, such as, notably, the redevelopment of the west side of Manhattan's midtown as a high-density, post-industrial district (*ibid.*, 51-52). Making such projects part of an Olympic bid offered a distinct advantage for development interests. It placed the projects on a strict timeline, giving them a better chance of overcoming the regulatory hurdles and political opposition that had derailed them in the past.<sup>15</sup>

Although the City's Olympic bid ultimately failed, many of its components remained part of the administration's land use plans (Danis and Sherman 2007). A few, such as the rezonings of the far west side and of Greenpoint/Williamsburg, Brooklyn remained tied to the bid's timeline (Roberts 2006). Others unfolded subsequently as part of a broader effort to target for high-density development "underutilized" land, such as rail yards, historically industrial stretches of the waterfront, and transit-accessible low-scale neighborhoods. This effort responded to a perceived need to accommodate a growing population and a growing demand for office space—an anticipated need based on aggressive projections in a report by the Group of 35, a committee of business, political, and labor leaders assembled by

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<sup>15</sup> Jay Kriegel, "New York's Olympic Plan." Speech to the Council on Foreign Relations. New York, July 10, 2002, as quoted in Brash 2011, 51.

Senator Chuck Schumer and former Secretary of the Treasury Robert Rubin (Larson 2013, 55).

The Bloomberg administration's ambitious planning agenda earned Doctoroff comparisons to Robert Moses (Fainstein 2005; Robbins and McIntire 2004). The administration itself embraced the comparison, emphasizing Moses' vision and ability to get things done (Roberts 2006). Doctoroff's focus and scale of operation were complemented (and occasionally at odds) with the work of Amanda Burden (Larson 2013, chapter 19). A social acquaintance of Bloomberg, Burden was a trained and experienced planner who had worked on the Street Life Project, an initiative by urban sociologist William "Holly" Whyte, and developed an interest in open spaces and street activity. She also embraced what had become by the time of her appointment a Jane Jacobs-derived planning orthodoxy that stressed the importance to neighborhoods of mixed-uses and 24/7 activity. Burden's interest in urban design would eventually translate into design principles codified as zoning regulations. While critics faulted these regulations for yielding homogeneous results (Larson 2013, 143), they were intended as ways to safeguard the complexity and diversity of city life.<sup>16</sup>

The tight connection between urban planning and economic development during the Bloomberg years made Doctoroff the dominant voice in shaping the administration's planning agenda, leaving Burden to address her concerns within the parameters laid out by the Deputy Mayor's office. While this led to occasional conflict whenever contemplated projects ran afoul of Burden's design imperatives,

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<sup>16</sup> Amanda Burden, remarks at "Jane Jacobs vs Robert Moses: How Stands the Debate Today?" at the City University of New York. October 11, 2006 (Larson 2013, 136).

the DCP Director saw a strong correspondence between her urbanistic ideas and the City's economic agenda and justified the City's planning program in terms of that correspondence. As urban scholar Scott Larson documents, this rationalization took the prominent form of a very public effort to reconcile the legacies of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs (2013). It also surfaced as a well-circulated set of development principles:

- Remain competitive with global cities;
- Pursue environmentally sustainable forms of growth;
- Protect the unique character of neighborhoods;
- Build "signature sites" and "great places;"
- "Recapture" the industrial waterfront and develop public spaces; and
- "Architectural excellence is good economic development." (*ibid.*, 51)

This list does not constitute a total departure from the planning priorities of past administrations. The primacy of economic development and global competitiveness had been a constant feature of post-fiscal crisis governance. The Bloomberg administration, however, distinguished itself by integrating environmental and design goals into its economic agenda. It also set itself apart through its aggressive methods for pursuing that agenda.

The main and most impactful land use tool used by the Bloomberg administration to address its planning goals was zoning. This has traditionally been the principal planning tool in the New York City, which ratified the first zoning ordinance in the country in 1916. Initially conceived as a way to control density and separate land

uses, the ordinance was overhauled once in 1961, to render it more flexible, and since then has been modified on a piecemeal basis.

Since the fiscal crisis, the City's zoning regulations had been criticized for being overly restrictive and stifling development. Under Bloomberg, however, zoning would become a tool not for suppressing density and mixed uses, but for spurring them (*ibid.*, 87). The administration allowed office and residential uses in numerous districts that had been zoned exclusively for manufacturing activity. This notably included extensive stretches of waterfront property. In many other neighborhoods, it allowed higher densities along wider corridors while concurrently restricting densities along narrower nearby side streets. Lastly, it downzoned several low-rise and typically more affluent<sup>17</sup> residential neighborhoods to exclude the sort of higher density development that had become increasingly common as the real estate market heated up during the 2000s (Barbanel 2004).

The Bloomberg administration's extensive application of rezonings was recent without precedent. By the end of the Mayor's third term, the City had submitted 119 rezonings for approval—a figure that exceeded the number of rezonings approved during the previous six administrations combined (Hum 2014)—and it had gotten all of them ratified, some in the face of strenuous community opposition. In total, the administration had rezoned almost 40% of the city's land (*ibid.*), encouraging a boom in housing construction, especially luxury residential towers (Woo 2010, 105), and paving the way for the production of over 25 million square

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<sup>17</sup>Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, New York University. "How Have Recent Rezonings Affected the City's Ability to Grow? (policy brief). March, 2010.

feet<sup>18</sup> in new office space.<sup>19</sup> These efforts created tremendous real estate pressure, displacing existing small businesses and residents<sup>20</sup> from rezoned neighborhoods.<sup>21</sup> They also reduced by over 20% the amount of land zoned for manufacturing<sup>22</sup> and destabilized some of the remaining manufacturing districts, where landlords, hoping for the opportunity to convert their property to more profitable residential or office uses, either kept their property vacant or refused to extend long term leases to industrial tenants (Rosenberg 2014). These effects, however, corresponded with the administration's goals of encouraging a transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy (Barbanel 2004; Wolf-Powers 2005) ("New York City should not waste its time with manufacturing")<sup>23</sup> and of increasing the value of land by "unlocking the [development] potential" of "underused" neighborhoods.<sup>24</sup>

The Bloomberg administration's reliance on zoning as a development tool reinvigorated DCP, an agency that had been downsized and relegated to a minor role since the fiscal crisis, as interest in comprehensive planning waned (Larson 2013, 87; Brash 2011, 39). This does not mean, however, that DCP resumed its role

<sup>18</sup> By way of comparison, Downtown Pittsburgh has a total of 37m sq feet of office space. Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership, "Market Facts," <http://www.downtownpittsburgh.com/what-we-do/economic-development/market-facts>

<sup>19</sup> Hudson Yards Development Corporation, "Rezoning," <http://www.hydc.org/html/project/rezoning.shtml>; NYC EDC, "Long Island City," <http://www.nycedc.com/program/long-island-city>

<sup>20</sup> "New York City Gentrification Maps and Data," *Governing*, <http://www.governing.com/gov-data/new-york-gentrification-maps-demographic-data.html>; Wyly et al. 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE) and the Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center, "Out of Business: The Crisis of Small Businesses in Rezoned Downtown Brooklyn" (report). July 2008.

[https://cdp.urbanjustice.org/sites/default/files/oob\\_31jul08.pdf](https://cdp.urbanjustice.org/sites/default/files/oob_31jul08.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Pratt Center for Community Development, "Protecting New York's Threatened Manufacturing Space" (issue brief). [http://prattcenter.net/sites/default/files/threatened\\_manufacturing.pdf](http://prattcenter.net/sites/default/files/threatened_manufacturing.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Michael Bloomberg, as quoted in Grimes 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Bloomberg, "Thinking Big for New York City," keynote address, Manhattan Institute Center for Rethinking Development. November 1, 2007, [http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/394-07/mayor-bloomberg-delivers-remarks-the-manhattan-institute-s-thinking-big-new-york-city-#/2\); see also Larson 2013, 93.](http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/394-07/mayor-bloomberg-delivers-remarks-the-manhattan-institute-s-thinking-big-new-york-city-#/2); see also Larson 2013, 93.)

as the City's principal planning organism. The agency concerned itself first and foremost with zoning and not with comprehensive planning. The administration used zoning primarily to pursue economic development goals. This placed DCP under Doctoroff's authority and subordinated the agency to the entity charged with carrying out the agenda of the Deputy Mayor's office, EDC (Larson 2013, 50; Brash 2011, 89). This was a familiar structural relationship between both agencies (Fitch 1996; Fainstein 2001). Since its inception in 1991 through a restructuring of the city's Public Development Corporation, EDC, a quasi-public not-for-profit development corporation, has been the lead "agency" on the City's major land use development initiatives, and this continued to be the case under Bloomberg (Brash 2011; Angotti 2008; Hum 2014; Fainstein 2005).

As a private entity, EDC differs in important regards from public agencies. It is funded through revenues from its own projects rather than through the regular budgetary process. It is not subject to the laws, such as procurement or public officers laws, that constrain public agency operations. This flexibility and relative lack of political accountability has led EDC to engage in behavior criticized for lack of transparency (Chen and Barbero 2010), illegality (Anuta 2012), violations of fiduciary duty (McShane 2013), ineptitude (Calder 2008f), and capitulations to unreasonable private sector demands (Gonzalez 2012). Nonetheless, flexibility and independence have been qualities valued by city administrations in dealing with the private sector and in undertaking land use development projects. This held especially true for the Bloomberg administration, which privileged business practices and the application of business expertise in the dispensation of government functions. Under Bloomberg, the EDC, whose operations and ethos

already resembled the private sector's, hewed ever closer to the corporate world in leadership, structure, and methodology (Brash 2011, 96). In keeping with this orientation, the administration created an ancillary local development corporation, staffed by EDC employees and headed initially by the EDC president, to lead the City's effort to redevelop Coney Island with the support of DCP and its sister agencies. The CIDC shared EDC's relative autonomy. Under the expansive terms set forth in its Certificate of Incorporation, the CIDC had to pursue the economic development of Coney Island.<sup>25</sup> The corporation, however, enjoyed great latitude in the pursuit of that goal. Provided that it did not act for the financial benefit of its members or attempt to influence legislation or political campaigns, it could do anything that a regular corporation can do. In this regard, it constituted a well-suited entity for spearheading in Coney Island the administration's entrepreneurial approach to redevelopment.

The City's Coney Island initiative typified planning under the Bloomberg administration, a style that in some ways reflected a continuation of a longstanding tendency in New York City governance to formulate plans according the preferences of private development interests (Brash 2011, 41). The extensive application of this approach, however, went far beyond the sporadic and fragmented projects undertaken by prior administrations. It constituted an effort to remake large portions of the city. By the time the City got to Coney Island, its ambitious planning program had started to evoke an earlier planning era, urban renewal, and to recall some of the least popular aspects of that planning approach: a willingness to override community objections, a tendency to sell projects with

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<sup>25</sup> New York City Economic Development Corporation. Certificate of Incorporation of Coney Island Development Corporation (Government document), September 2, 2003.

overly optimistic projections, and preference for large-scale interventions (Fainstein 2005, 2).

## B. Survey of Coney Island

This section presents the City's account of conditions in Coney Island. As indicated in the introduction, it does so in the City's own voice, paraphrasing and quoting from documents that explicitly set out to describe the context circa 2008 for the administration's redevelopment efforts.

Coney Island, a historic seaside neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, has been a unique and world-famous amusement destination since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

During the decades surrounding the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it featured three of the most remarkable amusement parks in the country, Luna Park (1902-1946), Dreamland (1904-1911), and Steeplechase Park (1897-1964). By the 1930s, the amusement area included as many as sixty bathhouses, thirteen carousels, eleven roller coasters, two hundred restaurants, and five hundred businesses, including arcades and hotels.<sup>26</sup> Since that time, however, the neighborhood's economic fortunes have waned due to a combination of factors that included: the Great Depression; the Second World War; greater access to automobile travel and to alternative destinations; the increasing prevalence of air conditioning as a source of relief from summer heat; the post-war shift in population toward the suburbs;

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<sup>26</sup> AKRF, Inc, & Eng-Wong, Taub, & Associates, P.C. "Coney Island Rezoning Final Environmental Impact Statement" (Hereafter referenced as FEIS) (Government Consultant Report). 1-3. Prepared for the Office of the Deputy Mayor of Economic Development. 2009. Retrieved from [http://www.nyc.gov/html/oec/html/ceqr/project\\_coney\\_island.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/oec/html/ceqr/project_coney_island.shtml).

disruptions caused by urban renewal; and New York City's 1970s fiscal crisis.<sup>27</sup> Coney Island's economic decline greatly reduced the amusement area's footprint and left behind large stretches of persistently vacant land. Nonetheless, Coney Island remains one of the most iconic amusement districts in the country. Easily accessible by public transit or via the Belt Parkway, the neighborhood still draws thousands of visitors each year to its various attractions—the beach, the new minor league baseball stadium (KeySpan Park), the New York City Aquarium, and the few remaining amusement rides, which include the landmarked Cyclone roller coaster and the Wonder Wheel.<sup>28</sup>

In recent years, the City has sought to reverse Coney Island's fortunes through major local investments. In addition to the \$39m spent on the construction of KeySpan Park, it has devoted \$18m to boardwalk repairs, and \$240m to an overhaul of the area's main subway station.<sup>29</sup> Despite these efforts, the district remains in need of revitalization. Some of the largest remaining amusements, including Astroland, the largest amusement park in the district, have shut down since 2006 due to real estate speculation, reducing the amusement area to just a few blocks of seasonal attractions.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the residential community immediately to the west of the amusement area has lost population and suffers from high rates of poverty and unemployment. The neighborhood's weak economic base, combined with the seasonal nature of the amusement district, have limited the viability of

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<sup>27</sup> FEIS; Coney Island Development Corporation. "Coney Island Strategic Plan" (Government Document). pdf 47 (Technical Memo, 7). 2004. Obtained from NYC EDC pursuant to the Freedom of Information Law.

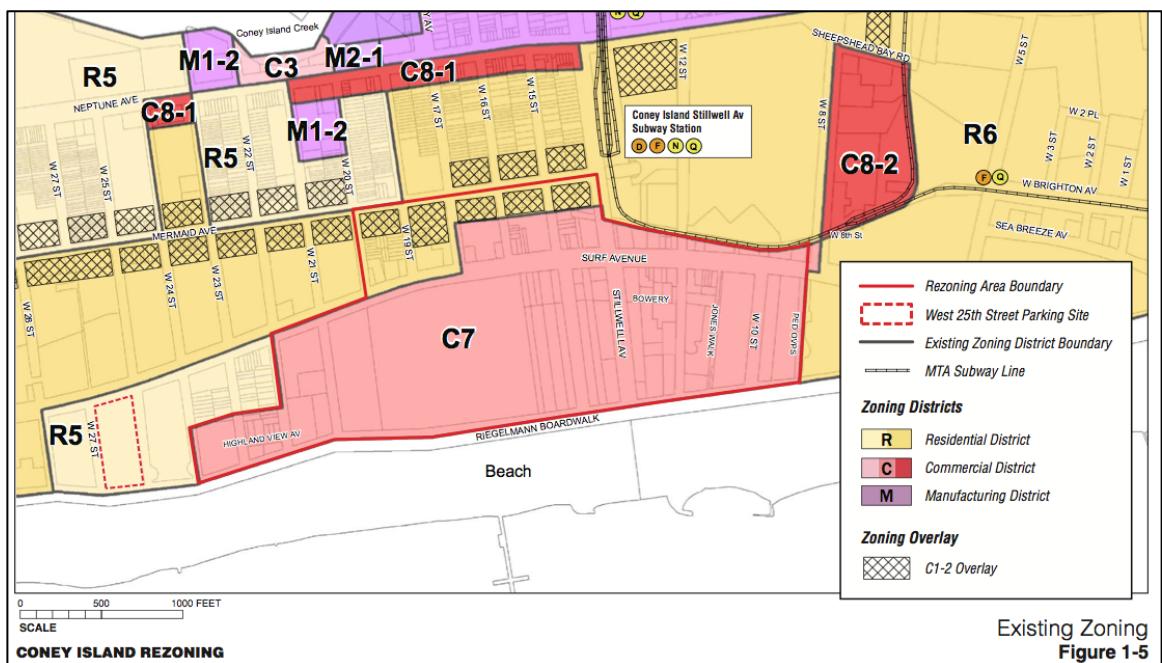
<sup>28</sup> NYC Economic Development Corporation. "Coney Island Strategic Development Plan Request for Proposals." (Government document), 1. December 19, 2003.; FEIS, 1-3

<sup>29</sup> NYC EDC, "Coney Island Strategic Development Plan Request for Proposals," 1.

<sup>30</sup> FEIS, 1-3

year-round businesses.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the area's numerous vacant parcels have failed to attract any development.

Coney Island is a peninsula on the southernmost end of Brooklyn. The amusement area sits roughly in the middle of the peninsula, just west of Brighton Beach. As a zoning district, it extends from Seaside Park to W 24<sup>th</sup> Street and from the Boardwalk up to Surf Avenue, but also includes the blockfronts north of Surf Avenue between W 8<sup>th</sup> Street and W 17<sup>th</sup> Street.



Map 1: Coney Island Zoning circa 2008

The amusement district is zoned C7, a designation, found nowhere else in the city, that limits development to low density<sup>32</sup> commercial indoor and outdoor

<sup>31</sup> NYC EDC, "Coney Island Strategic Development Plan Request for Proposals," 2.

<sup>32</sup> The allowable floor area ratio under C7 is 2.0.

amusements and complementary retail and services.<sup>33</sup> These outdated restrictions have greatly hindered growth in the area.<sup>34</sup> Most remaining active amusements are located between KeySpan Park and the Aquarium. Since the closing of Astroland, however, many of the blocks even within this area have been vacant. The few surviving attractions are confined to two blocks bounded by Surf Avenue, the Boardwalk, West 12<sup>th</sup> Street, and the Cyclone roller coaster, and to street frontages along three additional Surf Avenue blocks.<sup>35</sup>

The district's main attractions consist, from east to west, of the Cyclone, Coney Island USA, Deno's Wonder Wheel, and Nathan's Famous restaurant.<sup>36</sup> The Wonder Wheel forms part of a small amusement park —bordered by West 12<sup>th</sup> Street, Jones Walk, the Bowery, and the Boardwalk —that offers a variety of rides for children and adults. Additional amusements, arcades, concessions, and games can be found west of Stillwell Avenue, along the Bowery and Surf Avenue, and south of Surf Avenue, along West 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Jones Walk. The Boardwalk also contains a few additional concessions, bars and amusements between West 10<sup>th</sup> Street and West 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Like the beach itself, all of these attractions and establishments are seasonal and, with the exception of Coney Island USA, Nathan's Famous and a few others, close during the scarcely visited winter months.

The northern edge of the active amusement area, the north side of Surf Avenue, contains a series of uses that do not comply with the C7 designation, such as

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<sup>33</sup> Astella Development Corporation. 2002. *Coney Island Vision Plan*. Prepared by TAMS/Earth Tech. This report was a source of reference for the CIDC since its inception. The corporation referred bidding consultants to this document in its Strategic Plan RFP.

<sup>34</sup> FEIS, 1-6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2-5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1-4.

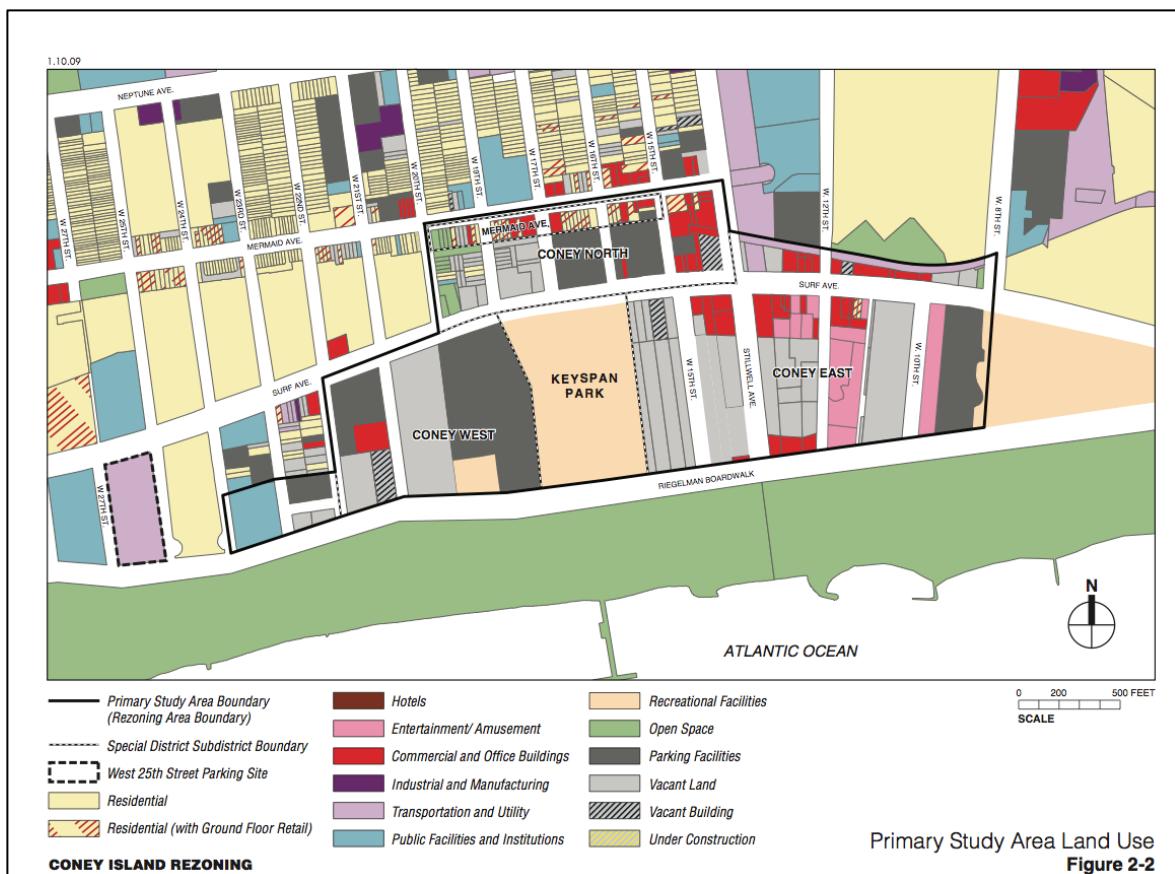
furniture stores and automobile showrooms.<sup>37</sup> Its eastern end features the Aquarium, “an important visitor attraction … that reflects the type of year-round entertainment uses that the rezoning seeks to preserve and grow.”<sup>38</sup> Its western end consists of largely vacant lots past which is located KeySpan Park, home of the minor league team the Brooklyn Cyclones, which attracts hundreds of thousands of summer visitors a year. The area immediately west of the stadium, between West 19<sup>th</sup> Street and West 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, consists of mapped parkland occupied by the Abe Stark ice skating rink and by the stadium’s parking lot, which lies vacant whenever there are no scheduled events. The blocks west of the parking lot—one, the former site of a bathhouse, and the other, the current home of an underutilized community garden and of the Childs Restaurant building—sit mostly vacant.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 1-4.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 1-5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1-5.



Map 2: Coney Island Land Uses circa 2008

The amusement district contains a number of noteworthy buildings and structures that contribute to the distinctive visual character of the neighborhood.<sup>40</sup> One of them, the Ringelmann Boardwalk, which runs along the southern edge of the district, offers unobstructed views of the beach, the ocean, and the neighborhood's three official New York City landmarks, the Parachute Jump, the Wonder Wheel, and the Cyclone.<sup>41</sup> The Parachute Jump is a 270-foot-tall filigree-like structure built for the 1939-1940 World's Fair as a ride from which people could jump on

<sup>40</sup> The FEIS defines architectural resources as properties or districts listed or eligible for listing on the State and National Registers of Historic Places as well as National Historic Landmarks, New York City Landmarks and Districts, and properties and districts found eligible for the latter designation by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (FEIS, 7-2). It defines visual resources more expansively to include structure that contribute to the "look" of the neighborhood (FEIS, 8-1).

<sup>41</sup> FEIS, 8-2.

guided parachutes (Figure 1). After its initial stint at the World's Fair, it was moved to Steeplechase Park, where it continued to operate until 1968.<sup>42</sup> The ride remains on the old Steeplechase site, which it now shares with KeySpan Park, and was recently restored and outfitted with an illumination system that makes it visible throughout the district even at night. The Cyclone is a 1927 wood-track roller coaster, one of the few left in the country (Figure 2). It consists of nine drops and six curves and reaches speeds of up to 68 miles per hour.<sup>43</sup> The ride and its illuminated "Cyclone" metal sign are highly visible at its West 10<sup>th</sup> Street location from the Boardwalk even as far west as West 17<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>44</sup> Lastly, the Wonder Wheel is a 1920 150-foot-tall Ferris Wheel equipped with eight stationary cars and sixteen cars that swing between outer and inner tracks (Figure 3).<sup>45</sup> The Wonder Wheel and its neon sign can also be seen from just about anywhere in the district. The rest of the amusement district contains one other New York City landmark and several other architectural and visual resources. The remaining landmark is the Childs Restaurant building, a 1923 five-story, stuccoed brick structure of elaborate design that fronts the Boardwalk toward the western end of the amusement district (Figure 4). The building's fanciful features, such as colorful terracotta reliefs depicting nautical themes and Spanish Colonial Baroque windows, set it apart from the other typically restrained restaurants in the Childs chain.<sup>46</sup> Two other restaurant buildings count among the remaining notable structures within the district. The first, the Renaissance Revival-style building on the corner of Surf Avenue and West 12<sup>th</sup> Street, is the former home of the first Childs restaurant in Coney Island and the current home of CI USA (Figure 5). Although the structure

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7-4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 7-4.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 8-10.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 7-5.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 7-7.

has been extensively altered and has lost many of its original features, it might be eligible for New York City landmark designation because of its “association with the development of the Coney Island amusement district.”<sup>47</sup> The second, Nathan’s Famous, stands on the corner of Surf and Stillwell Avenue, the site of the hot dog stand from which Nathan Handwerker launched the Nathan’s chain back in 1916 (Figure 6). This one-story structure, covered with painted and neon signs, has remained relatively unchanged since the 1940s. It may be eligible for the State and National Registers of Historic Places because of its association with the golden age of Coney Island in the 1920s and with the history of American fast food.<sup>48</sup>



**Figure 1: The Parachute Jump**

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 7-5.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 7-6.



**Figure 2:** The Cyclone Roller Coaster



**Figure 3:** The Wonder Wheel



Figure 4: Child's Restaurants Boardwalk Building



Figure 5: Coney Island USA Building



**Figure 6: Nathan's Famous**

The amusement area boasts one last architecturally significant building, the Shore Theater, on the corner of Surf and Stillwell Avenue (Figure 7). This 7-story Renaissance Revival-style structure, built in 1925, has a two-story base clad in limestone, a three-story brick mid-section, and a two-story terra cotta-clad crown that includes an overhanging balcony and a pavilion. It is the tallest building in the district. Although vacant since the 1970s, the theater has maintained its architectural integrity and might be eligible for New York City landmark designation for architectural value and for its association with the golden age of Coney Island in the 1920s.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 7-6.



**Figure 7: The Shore Theatre**

Two final structures, both within the former Astroland Amusement Park, deserve mention. Both “date to the early period of American space exploration and may meet eligibility [for inclusion in the State and National Registers of Historic Places] in the area of architecture, as vernacular amusement structures, and ... for their association with the history of Coney Island.”<sup>50</sup> One is the Astrotower, a 270’ tower installed in 1964 that used to take riders up and down in a rotating glass compartment (Figure 8). The other is the Astroland Rocket, which used to operate as a ride during the park’s early decades, and which still sits on top of a one-story concession building by the park’s former Boardwalk entrance (Figure 9).

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 7-6.



**Figure 8: The Astrotower**



**Figure 9: The Astroland Rocket**

The amusement area contains a number of other older buildings. All, however, have undergone extensive alterations and would therefore not meet the criteria for either landmark designation or for inclusion in the State and National Registers of

Historic Places. Henderson's Music Hall, a three-story brick Italianate-style building built in 1900 and located on the corner of Surf and Stillwell Avenues, operated as an entertainment venue until 1926, featuring the likes of Al Jolson, the Marx Brothers, and Sophie Tucker (Figure 10).<sup>51</sup> It subsequently housed the World of Wax Musee until that closed in 1984. The structure was cut in half during the widening of Stillwell Avenue in 1923 and at a later date had its windows and storefronts modernized. The adjacent Shore Hotel building dates back to between 1890 and 1906 and used to operate as a hotel and dance parlor (Figure 11).<sup>52</sup> Currently vacant, the structure has seen the addition of synthetic siding, an eave, and modern storefronts. The neighboring and contemporaneous Herman Popper and Brother building, a three-story brick building with stone trim and Classical architectural motifs, currently contains a shop and an art gallery (Figure 12).<sup>53</sup> It has had its cornice and original storefront removed and a portion of its recessed window openings filled in. The former Bank of Coney Island building, a three-story, limestone-clad, Classical Revival-style structure on the corner of Surf Avenue and West 12<sup>th</sup> Street, dates back to 1923 (Figure 13).<sup>54</sup> It has been boarded up and had many of its facade details removed.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the Grashorn Building, a three-story Second Empire-Style structure, is reputed to date back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, making it the oldest extant building in the amusement area (Figure 14).<sup>56</sup> Located on the corner of Surf Avenue and Jones Walk, the Grashorn contained a grocery store and a hardware store that served the amusement businesses for six decades. Little of the original structure remains except the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 7-9.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 7-9.

building form. Its dormers and cresting have been removed and synthetic siding covers its facade.



Figure 10: Henderson's Music Hall



Figure 11: Shore Hotel Building

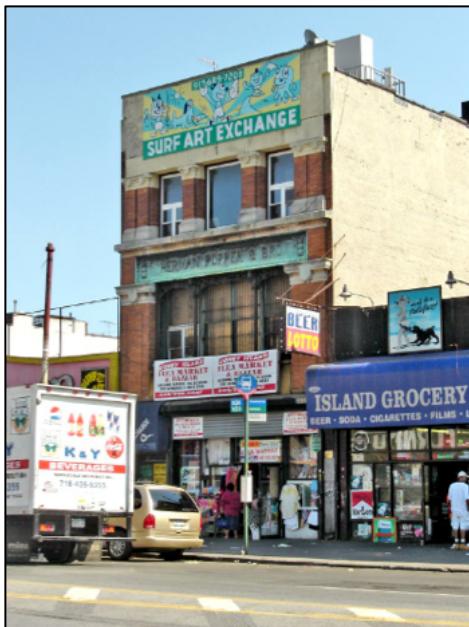


Figure 12: Herman Popper and Brother Building



Figure 13: Bank of Coney Island Building



Figure 14: Grashorn Building

## X. Chronicle (Part I)

This account of the Bloomberg administration's Coney Island redevelopment effort is divided into four parts. This first part covers the formation of the CIDC, the formulation of a strategic plan, the release of zoning recommendations, and the revision of those recommendations. The second part deals with the protests against the redevelopment plan submitted by City for public review. The third part focuses on the public review process and on the negotiations that led to the plan's ratification. And the fourth and last part looks at the transactions and preservation efforts that unfolded during the aftermath of the rezoning of the neighborhood.

### The CIDC

The Bloomberg administration developed an early interest in a Coney Island arena in connection with its bid to host the 2012 Olympic games. For a while, this kept the Sportsplex plan afloat as a likely volleyball venue.<sup>57</sup> More generally, the Olympic bid also led the administration to consider the development potential of waterfront neighborhoods throughout the city, especially those that, in its assessment, seemed underbuilt. In Coney Island, it would have discovered at the time several entire blocks of vacant or largely vacant waterfront property. It would also have found a recently refurbished boardwalk, a subway station undergoing major renovations, and a new publicly financed minor league stadium that, despite selling out during baseball season, had not attracted any further development to the area (Polgreen 2004).

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<sup>57</sup> Within a couple of years, plans for the Sportsplex would suffer a substantial setback. In early 2004, developer Bruce Ratner purchased the New Jersey Nets and began steps towards relocating the franchise to a new arena that he intended to build in Downtown Brooklyn. Ratner's plans would render the Sportsplex redundant both as regional athletic facility and as a potential venue for the Olympic games, which, in the end, would not be hosted in New York City anyway.

Over the years, numerous plans for the redevelopment of Coney Island had surfaced and floundered. A convention center built by Brooklyn Borough President Abe Stark in the 1960s had failed to attract any conventions and was turned into an ice skating ring; Mayor Koch's plan to bring casino gambling to the area required legislative approval that New York State never granted; and an ambitious plan for a large scale amusement park developed during the 1980s and 1990s by Kansas Fried Chicken magnate Horace Bullard was brushed aside, after years of delays, to make room for KeySpan Park. More recently, rumors had circulated about a variety of investors—including Michael Jackson, Disney, and Great Adventure—interested in developing amusement ventures in Coney Island, but nothing had materialized (Kadison 2003). Nonetheless, existing businesses had done well in the 2001 and 2002 seasons, and some had undertaken capital improvements (Hamill 2003) and brought in new attractions, such as batting cages, go-carts, a human target game, and a mini-golf course (Lee 2002). A few businesses attributed their recent success to the opening of KeySpan Park (Hamill 2003); but much of it had to do with the weather. The following season, one of the雨iest in memory, owners reported business plummeting between 50% to over 90% (Sherman 2003). Notwithstanding these sharp fluctuations in business and notwithstanding the current housing development boom at nearby Brighton Beach (Morrone 2004), Coney Island had known a constant in recent years: a fair supply of empty lots and shuttered storefronts. These circumstances led city officials to conclude that the stadium would not by itself lure private investment to the area (Van Riper 2003; Son 2003). Hoping to address this situation, and reminded by the neighborhood's new councilman, Domenic Recchia, of the City's promise to his

district, the administration incorporated the CIDC on September 2, 2003<sup>58</sup> and announced its creation shortly thereafter, describing its mission as follows:

The CIDC will create a comprehensive plan for the area that will capitalize on the revitalization that began with the construction of KeySpan Park as well as improve public access to our valuable waterfront resources, and develop a plan to attract diverse new businesses that will transform Coney Island into a year-round visitor destination.<sup>59</sup>

During his press announcement, Mayor Bloomberg emphasized Coney Island's iconic stature and argued that the local economy would need to become year-round in order to be "sustainable" ("It can't be just tied to the baseball season or to warm weather." [Saul 2003]). Beyond planning for visitor attractions, the CIDC would also facilitate the creation of affordable and market-rate housing, improve open spaces, support existing businesses, and enhance the overall quality of life.<sup>60</sup> The thirteen-member board of the corporation would be headed by Joshua Sirefman, the COO of the EDC. The twelve other members would consist of appointees of the Mayor, City Council, and the BBPO, each of whom would serve a two-year term without compensation. The appointees, listed below, included representatives from a variety of Coney Island and Brooklyn interests, but none from among the local amusement businesses.

- Pamela Adamo (Mayor)- Vice-President of KeySpan Energy, the utility company that serves most of Brooklyn;

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<sup>58</sup> New York City Economic Development Corporation. Certificate of Incorporation of Coney Island Development Corporation (Government document), September 2, 2003.

<sup>59</sup> Office of the Mayor of New York. "Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg Announces Formation of Coney Island Development Corporation" (Press Release). September 25, 2003. [http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor\\_press\\_release&catID=1194&doc\\_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2003b%2Fpr268-03.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1](http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor_press_release&catID=1194&doc_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2003b%2Fpr268-03.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1)

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.; Accompanying mayoral press conference, September 25, 2003.

- Kenneth Adams (Mayor)- President of Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce, original supporter of the Sportsplex;
- Judy Orlando (Mayor)- Director of Astella, a neighborhood CDC that develops housing;
- Astrudge McLean (Mayor)- Coney Island business owner, member of Astella, and resident of Sea Gate, a gated community on the western end of Coney Island;
- Chuck Reichenthal (Mayor)- District Manager of CB 13;
- Julius Spiegel (Mayor)- Brooklyn Commissioner of NYC Parks;
- Sol Adler (City Council)- Sea Gate resident and Director of 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y;
- Marty Levine (City Council)- Member of CB 13 and of Friends of the Boardwalk
- Cynthia Reich (City Council)- Deputy Director of the Aquarium;
- Sheryl Robertson (City Council)- Resident, member of CB 13, and director of a local youth environmental organization that undertakes improvement to the Kaiser Park, the largest local park;
- Terry Stanely (City Council)- Manhattan developer and original supporter of the Sportsplex; and
- Jon Benguiat (BBP)- Director of Planning of the BBPO.<sup>61</sup>

The CIDC would initially operate with an annual budget of \$200,000 and receive support from the EDC staff.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Office of the Mayor of New York. "Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg Announces Formation of Coney Island Development Corporation"). September 25, 2003. [http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor\\_press\\_release&catID=1194&doc\\_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2003b%2Fpr268-03.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1](http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor_press_release&catID=1194&doc_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2003b%2Fpr268-03.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1)

<sup>62</sup> Coney Island Development Corporation, public meeting, December 11, 2003. Field notes.

### The Strategic Plan RFP

After several internal meetings during its initial months, the CIDC decided, as its first major step, to hire a consultant to undertake a master plan. To that end, the CIDC issued a request for proposals (RFP) on December 19, 2003. Mayor Bloomberg's CIDC announcement had emphasized the recent public investments in the neighborhood and reaffirmed the City's commitment to reestablishing Coney Island as a tourist destination and to having it play a major role in the future of the city's economy.<sup>63</sup> Echoing the Mayor's pronouncement, the RFP listed the goals of the CIDC as:

- Strengthening the Coney Island economy through the attraction and development of sustainable year-round businesses;
- Improving of neighborhood business conditions and quality of life;
- Encouraging and facilitating the development of vacant and underutilized properties;
- Encouraging the development of market rate and affordable housing so as to create a stable consumer base;
- Improving neighborhood parks and other community facilities; and
- Encouraging the development and retention of existing industry.<sup>64</sup>

The CIDC's stated goals reflected the City's perception of the greatest challenges facing the neighborhood: the persistence of vacant lots, which had contributed to neighborhood decay; the seasonal nature of local business activity, which had failed

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<sup>63</sup> Office of the Mayor of New York. "Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg Announces Formation of Coney Island Development Corporation" September 25, 2003.

<sup>64</sup> NYC EDC. "Coney Island Strategic Development Plan Request for Proposals," December 19, 2003.

to support year-round commerce; high poverty and unemployment rates among local residents, who provide too weak an “economic base” to make local businesses viable; and an incongruence between Coney Island’s international reputation and the area’s run-down character.<sup>65</sup> To address these problems, the CIDC charged its consultant with four major tasks to be completed in approximately six months.

- 1) An assessment of the existing conditions of the area, including the review of recent documents and reports dealing with the neighborhood, approximately four to six interviews with community stakeholders, and an analysis of the applicability of up to five “urban planning and real estate successes in other urban seaside locations”;
- 2) A market analysis of the area, including an evaluation of obstacles to development, recommendations for uses appropriate to the neighborhood’s vacant parcels, and the identification of potential development entities;
- 3) The formulation of a) a design vision for streetscape improvements that captured “Coney Island’s quirky sense of place and waterfront character;” b) a plan for vehicular access to the area, and c) a strategy for better connecting “the community and its dramatic waterfront”; and
- 4) A final report that would synthesize the consultants’ work and include a strategy for implementation

Twenty-one consultant teams responded to the RFP. After a few weeks of deliberations, the CIDC announced in January the selection of a team made up of real estate consultants Ernst & Young, architectural firm Davis Brody Bond, and a

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

team of consultants specializing in traffic planning (Vollmer Associates), retail planning and branding (Halcyon/Columbia Center for High Density), retail mix and storefront analysis (Streetworks), cultural and entertainment programming (Karin Bacon Events), and entertainment and amusement industry analysis (Strategic Leisure). The team would be led by Ernst & Young, which had extensive experience in the development of large-scale plans for public/private collaborations, having worked on, among others, the Lower Manhattan Tourism Plan, the Fulton Street Retail Plan, and the Plan for the Xanadu retail and entertainment project in East Rutherford, New Jersey. The consultants expected to conclude their study and strategic plan by mid-June of 2004, allowing the City to then use that work as a foundation for a Coney Island redevelopment plan.

### **The Strategic Plan**

With the consultant report in hand, the City developed a strategic plan as a first step toward proposing actionable measures that would likely require legislative approval. This process took about a year and a half and included two large community charettes in May 2005, during which elements of the consultants' report were put up for discussion. By September of that year, the CIDC had formulated and approved the Coney Island Strategic Plan. The mayoral announcement of the plan reported an \$83.2m commitment in public funds toward its implementation.<sup>66</sup> The City estimated that the project would lead to over \$1 billion in private investment over the next ten years and result in the creation of 2,000 permanent jobs and 10,000 construction jobs over the next twenty.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> This amount included prior commitments by the City, the BBP, and the local congressman of, respectively, \$23m, \$7m, and \$3.2m, along with a new pledge by the City of \$50m.

<sup>67</sup> Office of the Mayor of New York. "Mayor Bloomberg announces strategic plan for future of Coney Island" (Press Release). September 14, 2005

The Strategic Plan put forth a set of ambitious and far-ranging objectives, the pursuit of which would require a series of yet undefined future public actions, including a major rezoning. The elaboration of these actions would take the City the next four years.<sup>68</sup> For the time being, the Strategic Plan offered a picture of the City's aspirations:

- The transformation of Stillwell Avenue into Stillwell Midway, a spectacular public open space connecting existing amusements with new development;
- A redesigned Steeplechase Plaza, incorporating new open space around the iconic Parachute Jump, between KeySpan Park and the boardwalk;
- New entertainment uses and retail amenities east of KeySpan Park;
- An increase of year-round activity along Surf Avenue, including the possible addition of a hotel and a spa;
- The establishment of a multicultural community center that would provide essential job training and community services, and help transform the western side of Coney Island into a vibrant residential neighborhood;
- The development of affordable housing on city-owned land;
- An improved public environment along Surf and Mermaid Avenues, the neighborhood's main commercial corridors;
- Improvements to the Boardwalk, including more cultural programming, additional changing facilities, and better connections to the beach;
- Better integration of the New York Aquarium with the adjacent amusement area; and
- Improvements to the area's parking and transit infrastructure.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.



**Map 3: Coney Island Development Corporation Strategic Plan 2006.**

The Strategic Plan divided the amusement district roughly in half. The area west of KeySpan Park, which would no longer be zoned for amusement uses, would contain neighborhood retail and high-rise residential development, some of it located on the portion of public land used for parking by the stadium. The area east of KeySpan Park would remain zoned primarily for amusement uses. The portion of that land between the Bowery and Surf Avenue would include a mix of open and enclosed amusements, as well as small-scale entertainment retail, restaurants, hotel services, and accessory retail. The rest of that land—everything south of the Bowery—would become mapped parkland and would still be reserved for outdoor

amusements. At the time of the Mayor's announcement of the Strategic Plan, all of the contemplated parkland except for the portion with the old Steeplechase site remained in private hands.

### **Enter Thor Equities**

While the City was developing its strategic plan, a series of land acquisitions within the amusement area had started to draw public attention (Skenazy 2005). Most were by the developer Thor Equities (Thor). These acquisitions allowed Thor's president, Joe Sitt, to play a pivotal role throughout the planning process.

Sitt had begun his career in retail in the 1990s when he founded Ashley Stewart, one of the first chains to specialize in upscale, plus-size female apparel catering to African-Americans. Noticing that landlords tended to charge him less rent than he felt the market could bear, he began acquiring properties in inner cities, assembling a sizable portfolio of shopping malls (Sargent 2005). At the time of his first Coney Island acquisitions, Thor owned twelve of them. The firm, however, had limited experience developing properties from the ground up (Schuerman 2006).

Undeterred by this, Thor proposed as its first major project in New York City a 60-story, 1.2 million-square-foot tower (Engquist 2007) on the site of Albee Square Mall, a shopping mall that stood on public land and that formed part of an extremely successful retail strip along Fulton Street in Downtown Brooklyn. In 2001, Thor had acquired the ground lease of the property on a speculative basis for \$25m in anticipation of a major rezoning of the area. Even as Sitt allowed the mall to fall into disrepair (deMause 2007a), he announced a grand development plan for the site and lobbied vigorously for the rezoning on which his proposal depended.

When the rezoning was approved in 2004, however, Sitt seemed to lose interest in

his project (Dean 2007) and sold the lease to the property within three years for \$125m (Gallahue 2007).

Sitt claimed to have a longstanding connection to Coney Island dating back to his childhood, when frequent visits earned him the moniker “Joey Coney Island” (Nicholson 2012). Although Coney Island regulars questioned the veracity of this claim,<sup>70</sup> Sitt did enjoy a critical connection to the neighborhood. He was an old friend and financial supporter of its local councilman, Dominic Recchia (Brown 2008a), who had informed him early on over coffee of the City’s ambitious plans for the district.<sup>71</sup> Thor’s first major Coney Island acquisition—a city block known as the Washington Baths site, for which Thor paid \$13m in April 2005—was located on the largely vacant western side of the district. Most of Thor’s subsequent purchases, however, took place on the eastern side the district, where all the remaining Coney Island amusements operated. Within three years, the firm had spent over \$100m<sup>72</sup> on Coney Island real estate and had become the largest private landowner in the neighborhood, controlling about 85% of the active amusement area. At first, Sitt’s intentions remained opaque, except for the occasional elliptical pronouncement that he wanted to bring back Coney Island’s glory days (Skenazy 2005). That changed in September 2005.

### **Thor’s Vegas**

*“Imagine something like the Bellagio hotel right now—just stop and see it. It’s exciting. It’s illuminated. It’s sexy.”*

- Joe Sitt (Sargent 2005)

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<sup>70</sup> Denson, Charles, interview by J.L. Aronson in *Last Summer at Coney Island* (documentary film). Distributed by IndiePix Films, 2010. DVD.

<sup>71</sup> Recchia, Dominic (New York City Council member), interview by Amy Nicholson, January 8, 2009. Unpublished transcript of raw footage for documentary film.

<sup>72</sup> “High on Affordable Harlem Housing.” 2005. *Crain’s New York Business*, October 17.

On September 26, a few days after the City announced its Strategic Plan, New York Magazine published an extensive story on Sitt's vision for Coney Island, describing it as "incredibly bold, audaciously cheesy, jaw-droppingly vegasified, billion-dollar glam-rock makeover" (Sargent 2005). The audacious two million square foot, \$1 billion, privately financed project contemplated a five-hundred-room four-star hotel, a megaplex, a gigantic carousel, and a blimp ride that flashed the resort's name in technicolor lights. Even by Thor's own analysis, the plan was a risky proposition. The viability of the hotel alone, for instance, would require a minimum year-round occupancy rate of 70% and room rates of \$250 to \$300 a night. Despite the risks, Sitt seemed committed to the project and claimed to have already begun negotiations with entertainment retail chains such as Ripley's Believe it or Not and Cold Stone Creamery. The project, however, would need more than Sitt's commitment and that of his private investors in order to proceed. Since it did not conform to existing zoning, it would also require the City's approval.

Although the City reserved judgment on Thor's proposal until further examination, it could not have helped but notice its departures from the Strategic Plan that the Mayor had just announced. By the time the City had formally presented its own plan, those differences had compounded, and Thor's scheme also included a nineteen-story condo tower (Hays 2005). The tower and, more generally, the inclusion of residential uses within the core amusement area would be a main source of contention between Sitt and the City throughout the remainder of the planning process.

### **Enter Dick Zigun**

Some local businesses and Coney Island regulars cautiously welcomed Sitt's proposal. They harbored concerns, however, about its glitz and scale, worrying that the project might displace longstanding businesses and destroy the character of the neighborhood (Sargent 2005). To some extent, these fears were mitigated by the Mayoral appointment of Dick Zigun to the CIDC board of directors in June 2006. Zigun, a P.T. Barnum-styled impresario known as the permanently unelected Mayor of Coney Island, was the artistic director of Coney Island USA (CI USA), a neighborhood arts organization whose spectacles and events drew inspiration from traditional attractions in the area. Those heartened by Zigun's appointment felt his involvement would "prevent the area from turning into a mall."<sup>73</sup> Zigun himself interpreted his appointment as a sign that the City "[got] Coney Island" (Erikson 2006). By the end of the 2006 season, however, changes within the amusement district had begun to accelerate beyond Zigun or any other CIDC board member's control. In October, Thor served eviction notices to eight of its tenants, asking the longtime amusement operators to remove their rides by the end of the year.<sup>74</sup> These included the Spider, the Zipper, the go-carts, batting cages, and a variety of carnival games (Sederstrom 2006). Thor's Boardwalk tenants, among them Ruby's Bar and Grill, Shoot-the-Freak, and Cha-Cha's, would be allowed to stay one more season and would, according to the firm's public statements, have the opportunity to move to the developer's new complex (Calder 2006b). That Halloween, CI USA's annual Creep Show at the Freak Show featured a villain modeled after Walt Disney who announced, "My company's building right here in Coney. The rumors are true. You

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<sup>73</sup> Julie Atlas Muz (Miss Coney Island) as quoted in Zimmer 2006.

<sup>74</sup> Among the evicted tenants were Eddie Miranda, who had operated the Zipper for eight years and Norm Kaufman who had operated rides in the area for fifty (Sederstrom 2006).

can count on me to bring you the most commercial, family oriented, dumbed-down version of mad genius there is." (Corbett and Sederstrom 2006)

### **Thor's Vegas 2.0**

Thor began to clear some of its sites during the months that followed. Local businesses, already concerned that the departure of the evicted attractions would reduce summer crowds, now worried that the construction work would only make matters worse (deMause 2007a). Meanwhile, Thor's development plans became more extravagant. Its next set of renderings for the now \$1.5 (and shortly thereafter, \$2) billion project depicted a 150' waterfall across the street from Stillwell Station with virtual mermaids and whales flickering through it. The end of Stilwell Avenue contained an indoor winterized water-park and an enclosed three-story carousel (Lombino 2006). The way to the park was flanked with large and unusual street furniture, including a gigantic "Mom"-tattooed elephant and a colossal martini glass with a mermaid swimming inside of it (Calder 2006c). Overhead, swirled a 4,000-foot-long roller coaster (Romano and Sederstrom 2006).



Figure 15: Thor Equities Rendering, Roller Coaster



Figure 16: Thor Equities Rendering, Mermaids and Whales



**Figure 17: Thor Equities Rendering, Carousel**

Because the above attractions, according to Thor, would make no money, the complex now included four towers of up to forty stories each, containing 900 luxury condominiums, two hotels, and time-share units (Calder 2007b). Residential uses now constituted 34% of the project's square footage; amusement uses, 14%, and the rest consisted of parking, retail, and hotels (Schuerman 2007). To rally support for the project, the firm launched a promotional website and began a newsletter campaign targeting Brooklyn residents (Calder 2006d). It then commissioned a phone survey that found that 81.8% of those interviewed favored its plan (Calder 2006a). Thor might have intended this demonstration of support to increase its leverage in future negotiations with the City about the terms of its rezoning; but it was the firm's next move that would do the most to strengthen its hand. In November, Thor acquired the 3.1-acre site of the district's largest remaining amusement park, Astroland, for \$30m (Bagli 2006).

### The Sale of Astroland

The family-owned Astroland had been the only major amusement park in Coney Island since the closing of Steeplechase Park in 1964, and it had remained under the management of its owners, the Albert family, since its inception. The amusement park's current manager, Carol Albert, had taken over the reins of the operation when her husband, co-founder Jerry Albert, fell ill. Despite having no experience in the family business, Carol Albert grew into the role, and the park thrived under her management. Astroland had long ago abandoned the exciting space-age theming of its early years. Nonetheless, it remained a popular destination and the cornerstone of the district, sponsoring or co-sponsoring much of the summer programming both within and outside its grounds.

As a major stakeholder in the amusement area, Albert kept abreast of the City's development agenda since early on in the process. When city officials told her that the administration hoped to turn Coney Island into a year-round destination, Albert hired an architect to design an expansion plan that would address the City's goals. The resulting design kept 80% of the existing amusement park intact and added a hotel and a water park.<sup>75</sup> Albert then retained lobbyists to help present her plan to city officials and get their feedback so that she could figure out her next steps. A year's worth of meetings at various levels of city government, however, yielded little guidance, only non-committal enthusiasm.

Thor had approached Albert before she began developing her expansion plans with an offer to purchase the Astroland site, but Albert, who remained committed to

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<sup>75</sup> Carol Albert (owner of Astroland), interview by J.L. Aronson, April 2007; unpublished transcript of raw footage for documentary film.

staying in Coney Island, rejected the offer out of hand. A year later, however, after failing to obtain any assurances or direction from the City regarding her plan, she had begun to worry. The more Albert saw of Thor's and the City's proposals, the more she feared that demolition and construction would have a devastating effect on her business. She estimated that revenues might drop by up to 25%.<sup>76</sup> If one added to that the always unpredictable possibility of bad weather, Albert's contemplated capital improvements began to seem reckless. These factors weighed on her when Thor, to her surprise, approached her once more with an offer. This time, after much hand wringing, Albert decided to sell. Albert felt conflicted about selling the Astroland site even at the time of the transaction, when she knew little about Thor's future plans. Within a few months, she would regret her decision.<sup>77</sup>

### **The Thor-City Minuet**

Throughout 2007, Sitt and the City performed an acrimonious public pas de deux, with the former insisting that he would scrap his plan for an amusement complex if not allowed to build residential towers, and the latter insisting that the inclusion of residential towers within the amusement area would undermine the revitalization of the neighborhood (Brown 2007). The administration openly defended its opposition to Thor's proposal by indicating the inherent incompatibility between residential uses and outdoor amusements and by pointing to the project's divergence from the direction laid out by the Strategic Plan approved by the CIDC two years earlier (Schuerman 2007). Privately, however, officials also doubted the sincerity of Sitt's intentions, viewing them in light of the developer's history of

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

promoting grand development plans merely to generate interest in his property before flipping it (Calder 2007a).

Sitt took a more eclectic and confrontational approach in his response to the City. Having already argued that the project's economic viability depended on the use of condominium revenues to subsidize amusement park losses, Sitt accused the City of bureaucratic inflexibility and decried its staff's lack of experience and vision. He regarded his "zany," "freaky," and "outside the box" proposal as perfectly suited for Coney Island in ways that, in his view, the City, in its nearsightedness, did not appreciate (Schuerman 2007). Moving beyond insults, Sitt also threatened that the City's intransigence might force him to "mothball" his project until the next administration. While a threat to sit on a \$100m real estate investment for "five or ten years" might ring hollow, Thor had by this time recouped most of its investment in the area with the sale of the Washington Baths site. Having purchased it for \$13m in 2005, the firm sold it in \$2006 for \$90m to Taconic Investment, which expected to develop the site for high-rise residential uses, in conformance with the City's anticipated zoning changes.<sup>78</sup>

The dispute between Sitt and the City did not unfold solely in the media and public forums; it also played out on the ground, in the amusement district itself. The month-to-month lease renewals Thor offered to its new tenants included a "confidentiality clause" imposing a penalty of \$10k or eviction for publicly voicing opinions about the neighborhood's "redevelopment activities." The clause also barred for three years after the termination of the lease both participation in

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<sup>78</sup> New York Department of Finance, Office of the City Register. Property transaction records. Retrieved from <http://www.oasisnyc.net/map.aspx>

parades or similar demonstrations and the signing of petitions (Sederstrom 2007a). Dianna Carlin, the owner of the Boardwalk establishment Lola Staar Souvenir Boutique, objected to the confidentiality clause. Unable to have it removed, however, she eventually relented and signed the renewal. Despite her acquiescence, Thor served her with eviction papers one day later (deMause 2007a). When she asked for an explanation, Thor's lawyers blamed the negotiations with the City (Zimmer 2007a).

### **"No Condos in Coney"**

A few weeks after being notified of her eviction, Carlin organized a protest in the steps of City Hall entitled "No Condos in Coney." The event featured dozens of Coney Island regulars, including performers, business owners, residents, and frequent visitors, many costumed in colorful, Coney-themed outfits. The crowd included members of the Polar Bear (winter bathing) Club, mermaids, exotic dancers, beauty pageant contestants, pirates, a rabbit, and a twenty-piece band. It also featured notable participants beyond Carlin, such as Charles "Mr. Coney Island" Denson, a Coney Island historian who had grown up in the neighborhood and now directed the Coney Island History Project, and Richard Eagan, a life-long regular who along with Philomena Moreno had founded the Coney Island Hysterical Society arts collective in the 1980s.

Amid songs and chants of "Save Coney Island," speakers lambasted Thor's proposed high-rises, warning against their incompatibility with outdoor amusements and against their gentrifying effect. Some also inveighed against the developer's broader plan, finding it redolent of corporate development and antithetical to the spirit of Coney Island. Merman James "Tigger" Ferguson

captured all three sentiments, “[Coney Island] is where a family can go and enjoy themselves today without maxing out their credit card. We have enough malls, enough condo developments, enough McDisney Coca-lands!” (Nicholson 2012).

### **Thor Regroups**

In the days leading up to the Save Coney Island “No Condos in Coney” demonstration, Thor made with a series of conciliatory moves. First, the firm scaled back its plan, moving 900 condo units farther from the Boardwalk and concentrating them in one tower (Calder 2007b). It then issued a statement agreeing with the protest’s view that Coney Island needed saving and pointing to its own \$2b plan as a way to solve the neighborhood’s problems (Zimmer 2007b). Finally, Sitt called Carlin to offer her a new lease (Calder 2007c). Carlin postponed the conversation until after the demonstration; but she subsequently agreed to a renewal without the confidentiality clause and at a lowered rent, in compensation for the legal and moving expenses incurred by her during the eviction (Zimmer 2007c).

Despite Thor’s concessions, the future of the amusement district remained up in the air. The firm’s plans for its sizable land holdings seemed to evolve on a monthly basis. In June, Sitt announcing that he had “rolled over” in response to criticism and released yet another proposal. This one, he claimed, eliminated the residential condominiums and traded density for “new, edgy, and outlandish” attractions. “This is our way of showing the New York community that we’re responsive to what they want,” said Sitt, who personally went down the Boardwalk to share the news with opponents of his previous plans (Calder 2007d).

The City, which had remained steadfast in its opposition to high-rises within the outdoor amusement area, welcomed Thor's change of plans. In his initial assessment, however, EDC President Bob Lieber called the plan a "wolf dressed up as a sheep (Bagli 2007a)," noting that Sitt had merely disguised the condos as timeshares and hotels, leaving the project's density virtually unchanged and still asking for over \$100m in public subsidies. Sitt declared himself baffled that anyone could remain opposed to a project that would generate so many jobs, "careers", and opportunities for commerce and recreation for a variety of demographics: "Tell me what issue any constituenc[y] would have with our plan; we're asking for motherhood. Motherhood. Apple pie, Chevrolet, and Coney Island" (Bagli 2007a).

Unmoved by Sitt's salesmanship, the City issued within two months a categorical rejection of his plan, calling it "atrocious" and "dead in the water". City officials also openly questioned the firm's credibility, alluding to its history of speculation and unkept development promises (Sederstrom 2007c). Nonetheless, the administration proposed a way forward, offering to swap 10 acres of Thor's land within the contemplated amusement area for 8 acres of city land to the west of KeySpan Park—land that would be zoned for far higher density and less restrictive uses. A commentator estimated, using the sales price of the Washington Baths site as a benchmark, that the swap would yield Thor a \$110m net gain (deMause 2007c). Thor, however, expressed no interest in the City's offer.

### **Exit Astroland?**

With the negotiations between Thor and the City at a standstill, local businesses wondered what the following summer of 2008 would hold in store for them. CI USA had the good fortune of having been able to achieve a greater degree of

stability. After five years of seeking funding to acquire its building, the organization received a \$6m grant from the Department of Cultural Affairs and managed to purchase the site in the summer of 2007.<sup>79</sup> Most businesses in the district, however, lacked CI USA's security of tenure. The uncertainty surrounding the rezoning had discouraged long-term leases and made it difficult for Thor's tenants to find alternative space within the neighborhood. It also discouraged businesses from making capital investments in their operations. Security of tenure alone, however, would not have ensured their viability in the near future. Thor's property remained a vast, unattractive construction site, and no one knew the firm's true intentions for it. Furthermore, no one could predict whether Thor would allow Astroland, the district's anchor, to return the following season. Given the reduced number of attractions left after the recent wave of evictions, Astroland's departure would have had a devastating effect on the remaining businesses.

Sitt kept his tenants in the dark about their lease extensions through the 2007 season. While this unsettled all of them, it especially distressed Albert, who, in order to participate in the market for amusements rides for the following season, needed to decide by September what to do with her rides and whether to keep her employees on payroll (deMause 2007b). Ziguin remained optimistic: "What I would like to see happen is for Thor to sell us the Grashorn Building, for Astroland to get a one-year reprieve, for the City to stick to its guns with rezoning, for the CIDC to pick the best designers possible . . . and for world peace to break out across the universe" (deMause 2007d). Thor's negotiating overture proved at least some of Ziguin's optimism ill founded. The firm offered Astroland a seventeen-fold rent

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<sup>79</sup> CI USA also tried to acquire the nearby Grashorn building, the oldest building in the district, to house its museum. But the yearlong negotiations with its owner, Thor Equities, proved fruitless (Zimmer, 2007d).

increase, from \$170k<sup>80</sup> to \$3m. Albert promptly rejected the offer and insisted on an extension under the current terms (Calder 2007f). At the end of the season, she suspected—along with the amusement park’s longtime visitors and four hundred employees—that it might be Astroland’s last. She shut down the facility for the season to a mixture of tearful hugs and musical revelry without a hint of a deal in place. The next day, a few dozen supporters staged a protest during which speakers announced a 9,000-signature petition calling on Thor to offer Astroland a one-year lease extension (deMause 2007e). Councilman Recchia, Sitt’s friend and ally, attended the proceedings, but seemed there primarily to assure the public that even if Thor pushed Astroland out, it would have amusements on the site by next season. Ziguin, a cautious, erstwhile supporter of Thor’s proposal, sent a letter a few days after the protest to over a hundred city officials denouncing Sitt as a bully bent on destroying the neighborhood. Once again, Recchia came to Sitt’s defense: “If Sitt didn’t care about Coney, he wouldn’t be doing any of this stuff” (Sederstrom 2007e).

The standoff between Thor and its tenants resolved itself unexpectedly by the end of September thanks to Recchia’s intervention. The Councilman first helped broker a one-year extension for the boardwalk tenants (Calder 2007h). Then a few days later, Thor and Albert agreed to a one-year lease extension without disclosing its terms (deMause 2007g). The developer’s spokesman explained Sitt’s about-face as a concession to the community (Sederstrom and Hays 2007). The lease renewals heartened the City, Recchia, and local businesses, all of whom wanted to avoid empty lots in the district until new development was ready to take place. And no

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<sup>80</sup> This amount was subsequently reported as \$180k (Calder 2007f).

development was likely to take place until the ratification of the City's zoning recommendations, which the administration had hoped to finalize back in June but still remained on the drafting board (deMause 2007f).

Ironically, despite all the turmoil and uncertainty, local business owners and operators declared the 2007 season a great success, reporting a substantial increase in revenue from the previous season. As always, the weather played a role in the district's fortunes. But some also attributed the summer's success to visitors who feared—despite the City's insistent assurances to the contrary (deMause 2007b)—that this would be Coney Island's last season and who wanted to see the neighborhood, perhaps for the first and last time, before it was gone (*ibid.* 2007d). Visitors that summer might have been taken aback by the number of vacant lots in the district. They might have also been surprised to find the Boardwalk in a state of disrepair, with rotting wood planks, exposed nails, and occasional holes (Hays 2007). The City estimated that the Boardwalk repairs would cost \$200m and hoped that private landowners, as well as the state and federal government would help shoulder the expense (Calder 2007i).

### **The Zoning Recommendations**

The City announced its widely anticipated zoning recommendations in November 2007. The proposal, the first rezoning in the area since 1964, divided the 19-block amusement district into three zones. "Coney North," which extended north of Surf Avenue, between Stillwell Avenue and West 20<sup>th</sup> Street, would contain up to 1,800 residential units and up to 100,000 square feet of retail space. "Coney West," the area south of Surf Avenue between KeySpan Park (i.e. West 19<sup>th</sup> Street) and West 24<sup>th</sup> Street, would include up to 2,700 residential units and up to 360,000 square

feet of retail space. And “Coney East”, the area south of Surf Avenue between West 8<sup>th</sup> Street and KeySpan Park, would contain a 15-acre amusement park (Sederstrom 2007f) and allow in the rest of the zone catering halls, movie theaters, restaurants, bowling alleys, a water park, entertainment retail, and two hotels west of Stilwell Avenue (Bagli 2007b).



**Map 4: Proposed Land Uses, Coney Island Rezoning Framework, January 2008.**

The Mayor's press conference featured glossy renderings of some of the amusement area's possible attractions. Those highlighted by Bloomberg included: "a high-speed roller coaster that would wind through the district" (Zimmer 2007e); a 350-foot-high spinning column (Calder 2007j); "a year-round water park and hotel with slides, rides and awesome year-round aquatic attractions" (Zimmer 2007e), such as a 40,000 square foot ice skating ring that would turn into a sailing pond during warm weather (Calder 2007j); and other "thrilling new icons" (Zimmer 2007e).



Figure 18: Rendering, Coney Island Rezoning Framework, 2008.

The City's renderings served only an illustrative purpose. The rezoning offered no guarantees that those attractions would ever be built. In order, however, for them to even stand a chance of being built, the City's recommendations would require a set of public approvals. The City Council would have to weigh in on all zoning and mapping changes; and a central element of the plan, the alienation of parkland, would require even more than City Council approval. The proposal located much of its projected housing development on the KeySpan Park 8-acre parking lot, which was mapped as city parkland. In order for that development to happen, the State legislature would need to approve the alienation of the land. State guidelines stipulate that in order to prevent the net loss of parkland, any alienation should proceed in tandem with the acquisition and dedication of substitute parkland. The city intended to fulfill this requirement with the creation of a 15-acre amusement

park that would stretch from the Bowery to the Boardwalk and from KeySpan Park to the Cyclone.<sup>81</sup>



**Map 5: Proposed Alienation and Creation of Parkland, Coney Island Rezoning Framework, 2008.**

In order to dedicate the new parkland, however, the City would first need to take possession of the land. And most of it remained in the hands of Thor Equities, whom the City wanted to exclude from the development of the amusement area. Brooklyn City Planning Director Purnima Kapur and the newly promoted CIDC president Lynn Kelly both indicated that a “single entity” would develop and manage the new amusement area (deMause 2007g). But Deputy Mayor Doctoroff made clear that that job was not Thor’s for the taking:

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<sup>81</sup> The City’s decision to count an amusement area as parkland raised some eyebrows. Commercial uses within parkland, however, had well-established litigated precedent in New York State. Besides, amusements uses seemed hardly less park-like than the parking in the land being alienated.

What we mean by a developer is a developer who has real world-class experience in developing a one in [sic] a kind completely unique something that pays homage to the history of Coney Island amusement area. It's a very different business building a shopping center than it is building a great amusement area.<sup>82</sup>

In case the oblique reference to Sitt's development experience left any doubts, Doctoroff added that Thor did not have the experience for the job (Bagli 2007b).

Reactions to the City's presentation varied. Sitt issued a statement expressing his disappointment with the plan, but also his hopes of reaching an agreement with the City (Sederstrom 2007f). Others, like Zigun and Albert, greeted the City's commitment to the preservation of amusements with cautious enthusiasm (deMause 2007g). Zigun did object to the proposed building heights and retail uses. But Kelly assured him that the announcement marked merely the beginning of the process that would include a formal public review and months of deliberation. If the political climate in Coney Island throughout the previous season gave any indication, that process would not go smoothly. And the first public event following the City's announcement lived up to those expectations (Robau 2007c).

### **Enter the “Public”**

The City scheduled its first informational session on the zoning recommendations for November 19 at a small auditorium in the Coney Island. Over 500 people showed up (Calder 2007k). Many arrived on busses chartered by State Senator Carl Kruger, wearing, for no apparent reason, yellow baseball caps. The excessive turnout forced the City to cancel the event. Kruger, whose district did not include

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<sup>82</sup> Q&A with Michael Bloomberg, Mayoral press conference, November 8, 2007, see Nicholson 2012.

Coney Island, had shown up for the express purpose of attacking the City's parkland proposal.<sup>83</sup> Undeterred by the cancellation, he used the event as an opportunity to characterize the plan as an expensive backdoor approach to eminent domain, and promising to defeat it if it came before the state senate. Recchia, for his part, lambasted the City for not working with existing landlords to reach a compromise and then accused it, using the CIDC's pre-printed cancellation notices as evidence, of having intended to cancel the meeting all along in order to avoid the public confrontation. The CIDC subsequently issued an apology for the cancellation but did not respond to the representatives' other charges (Robau 2007d).

By comparison, the rescheduled event proved a relatively conventional affair despite Kruger's renewed efforts. The Senator revisited his criticism of the City's plan in a lengthy, heated (and heckled) speech during which he kept referring to Coney Island as Brighton Beach. But the session consisted primarily of an overview of the City's plan and a discussion of the attendees' main concerns: parking and local jobs. Given the preliminary nature of the plan, the City limited itself to acknowledging the concerns, repeating earlier job projections, and describing hypothetical parking solutions (Robau 2008a). A more detailed discussion would have to wait until, among other things, the completion of the environmental review (i.e., the City Environmental Quality Review or CEQR) that precedes the public review process. This review begins with the drafting of an Environmental Assessment Statement (EAS) and of a scope of work for the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). A scoping session is then held during

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<sup>83</sup> While Senator Kruger's interest in Coney Island seemed surprising at the time, future coverage reported that Joe Sitt, his wife, and his lobbyist had been political benefactors of the Senator (Ross 2009).

which the public can comment on the proposed scope of work. This fairly technical hearing took place on February 13, allowing work on the DEIS to proceed. The voluminous DEIS must: describe the government action, including its context, needs, and benefits; analyze the impacts of the action; analyze reasonable alternatives to the action; and identify ways to mitigate adverse impacts that the action might have. Only after the DEIS has been completed can the formal public review process (i.e., the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure, or ULURP) commence. While this process got underway, Coney Island businesses prepared for that year's unusually early opening day of March 16.<sup>84</sup>

### **“The Summer of Hope”**

Most of the attractions and businesses left at the end of the 2007 season would be coming back this year, with a few surprise additions. Thor, declaring the upcoming season the “summer of hope,” promised to bring to its vacant lots a series of county fair rides under the name of “Dreamland”. While the reference to the epic, early 20<sup>th</sup> Century 15-acre amusement park might have been an overstatement, the proposed rides still constituted an improvement over the unpopular inflatable slide (Robau 2007a) and the under-attended week-long circus (Robau 2007b) that had occupied Thor’s land the previous season after the demolition work concluded. Unfortunately for those counting on Thor’s new attractions to help draw in visitors, the “summer of hope” ended halfway through the season (Robau 2008i), when the developer removed “Dreamland” and, after a period of vacancy (Robau 2008j), replaced it with another small batch of cheap inflatable rides (Robau 2008k).

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<sup>84</sup> Astroland and most Coney Island attractions traditionally open only on weekends starting on Palm Sunday and then all week long after Memorial Day.

One new attraction enjoyed greater success and drew national attention: the new “waterboard thrill ride” installation in CI USA by artist Steve Powers (Robau 2008l). Inspired by Coney Island’s traditional freak shows, Powers concealed the installation behind a screen that featured the price of admission and a provocative description of the attraction. The artist painted it to simulate the outside of a prison cell, and then added to it a mural of popular cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants getting waterboarded and exclaiming, “It don’t GITMO better!” Inside, animatronic figures enacted the attraction’s eponymous method of “enhanced interrogation.” A local blogger aptly described it as a “thrill ride for the mind” (*Ibid.*).



**Figure 19:** Waterboard Thrill Ride

Finally, toward the end of the season, less than a year after almost losing her Boardwalk store, Carlin made a splash by opening a roller rink—a first-time

venture for her—at the landmarked Child’s building, on the westernmost edge of the district. She convinced the new owners of the vacant building, Taconic, to let her operate the rink there on a temporary basis rent-free. Her design for the facility, named—in the second overstatement of the summer—the Lola Staar Dreamland Roller Rink, drew inspiration from the Moulin Rouge and contemporary Tokyo (Calder 2008a). She envisioned having the rink double as an arts center and burlesque performance venue (Lysiak 2008). Carlin originally hoped to open her doors at the beginning of the season and did host a sold-out inaugural event in March (Buckley 2008). Unfortunately, she struggled to raise enough funds to pay her insurance policy and the Department of Buildings assembly permit (her message to sponsors as late as May was: “I’ll freaking put your logo on everything, I’ll tattoo it on my forehead. Seriously!”) (deMause 2008b). This delayed the opening until late July, after which the venue enjoyed a popular run of weekend events through October. Carlin’s more grandiose plans would have to wait till next season. Already, though, the rink had given physical expression to some of the development ideas that she had begun to voice in her burgeoning “Save Coney Island” advocacy:

Coney Island is a place that takes you into this other magical world. Shopping malls and high-rise hotels don’t have that same characteristic, they don’t take people into that heightened state of reality, which is what has made Coney Island this legendary, amazing place. Everyone was using the word magical to describe [Dreamland Roller Rink], even straight guys. (Chernikoff 2008)



**Figure 20: Dreamland Roller Rink at Night**

### **The Zoning Recommendations Revisited**

Despite CI USA and Carlin's best efforts, the summer of 2008 became more noteworthy for the controversies that mired it from the outset than for any of its new attractions. In March, before the season had even begun in full, the NY Parks Department (Parks) erected a five-foot-high wood and wire fence that obstructed entrances to Boardwalk businesses between 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Stillwell Avenue. When owners sought an explanation, Parks informed them that the fence would need to remain in place for the entire summer because the state of disrepair of that stretch of boardwalk represented a public hazard. In response, two of the affected business owners, Carlin (Lola Staar) and Michael Farrell (Ruby's Bar and Grill) issued a press release describing the situation and threatening to take down the fence and undertake the boardwalk repairs themselves if Parks did not rectify matters (Robau 2008b). In response, the City would remove the fencing and undertake the necessary public safety measures before Memorial Day. Before doing so, however,

it stirred up a far larger controversy by revising the zoning recommendations that it had issued just a few months before.

The City's new recommendations reduced the outdoor amusement area from 15 acres to 9 acres and increased by that difference the amount of land devoted to higher density entertainment retail and hotel uses. The revisions also added two high-rise hotel buildings on the southern side of Surf Avenue, along the amusement area's northern border. Finally, while the plan still intended to have a single entity manage the parkland, it now allowed existing landowners within its bounds to develop their land, provided they abide by the zoning guidelines (Bagli 2008a). The media interpreted the revisions as a last ditch effort by the administration to salvage the project from the cooling real estate market before the term-limited<sup>85</sup> Mayor's time in office expired (Calder 2008b). The new recommendations had resulted from behind-closed-doors negotiations held since November between the City and landowners. Under the new scheme, the City would need to acquire only half of Thor's land within the amusement area, allowing the developer to build on the other half at a far higher density (Calder 2008c). Recchia, who in recent public forums had referred to Sitt as a "good friend" (deMause 2008a), called the revisions a step in the right direction, arguing that they "[struck] a balance between the needs of the City and making sure the landowners" were appeased (Bagli 2008a). In a mass email to undisclosed recipients, Kelly described the changes as minor adjustments (Robau 2008c). Deputy Mayor Lieber, Doctoroff's successor, characterized them as an attempt to "bling [the project] up" and bring "economic opportunities and jobs for local residents" (Bagli 2008a).

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<sup>85</sup> At the time, term limits barred the Mayor for seeking re-election in 2009. In October 2008, the Mayor led a successful campaign to repeal term limits, enabling him to seek office for a third term.

## XI. The City (Part II)

This chapter presents the City's image of Coney Island, its analysis of the site, and its ideas for the neighborhood's redevelopment. As indicated in the introduction, it does so in all cases in the City's own voice, paraphrasing and quoting from documents and interviews that explicitly address these topics. This choice is meant not only to accurately convey the City's perspective, but to do so in the language that SCI would encounter throughout the planning process.

### A. The Image of Coney Island

Today, Coney Island is "a vestigial image of its more vibrant past."<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, it retains an iconic stature as the birthplace of the modern amusement park.<sup>87</sup> Coney Island's enduring fame, however, arises not just from its pioneering role, but also from the distinctive features that historically set it apart as an amusement destination. First, its crowds were exceptionally large and diverse; and second, its attractions were as eclectic as they were unusual.

New Yorkers first began to come to the beach in 1800 for the sea and cool breezes. Even then, there was something for everyone. Boarding houses, bungalows and bathhouses offered weekend retreats for the working classes. Hotels on grand estates catered to the well-heeled on the western end of the island. Over time, small amusements were opened, offering entertainment off the beach. Arcades with games, beer gardens and exotic exhibitions proffered inexpensive diversion for the day. By 1910, the amusement attractions had fully evolved. At its height, the amusement district reached from West 8<sup>th</sup> Street all the way to West 37<sup>th</sup> Street, and well upland of Surf Avenue. Coney Island was not one amusement park—it was a mixture of small arcade operators and large, gated parks, such as

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<sup>86</sup> Ernst & Young LLP. "Coney Island Strategic Development Plan," Response to EDC's Request for Proposals. January 2004.

<sup>87</sup> Seth Pinsky, interview by Amy Nicholson. March 18, 2009.

Luna Park, Dreamland and Steeplechase Park, that offered fantastical escapes for the day. One could walk along the Boardwalk or Surf Avenue and enjoy rides, games, pools and bathhouses, theaters and beer gardens. There were things to do all along the way.<sup>88</sup>

Coney Island's attractions were not just plentiful and varied but also original and out-of-the-ordinary. "The rides and attractions were always the newest, the scariest, or the most bizarre"<sup>89</sup> Neighborhood inventions included "the hot dog, the roller coaster and many things like the incubator babies.... [T]his sense of innovation and experimentation and edginess... has not been captured anywhere else in the world, let alone in any other amusement park."<sup>90</sup> It is all the more remarkable in that it found expression in an otherwise "regular neighborhood." Indeed, "Coney Island [has] endured, in part, because it was a real place, not a Disney-esque imitation of Main Street USA. People lived and worked in Coney Island. Business slowed down in the winter, but did not stop. It was a New York neighborhood that just happened to have a few unique and priceless features."<sup>91</sup> In the end, it is the idiosyncratic totality of its "enduring elements [that] have sustained the reality and the dream of Coney Island. The ocean, the beach and the boardwalk, the amusements and arcades are synonymous with fun in the summer sun, adventure and intrigue, the new and the oddly familiar."<sup>92</sup>

## B. Analysis of Coney Island

Coney Island has been a pale approximation of its outsized image for many years now and has long been in need of revitalization.

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<sup>88</sup> CIDC, "Coney Island Strategic Plan," pdf 46, technical memo 6.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Lynn Kelly (President of Coney Island Development Corporation), interview by Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009. Unpublished transcript of raw footage for documentary film.

<sup>91</sup> CIDC, "Coney Island Strategic Plan," pdf 48, technical memo 8.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

On the one hand, the thing that people think about when they think of Coney Island—the amusements—have been in decline for decades. The decline [has been] getting to the point where the neighborhood [is] in danger of losing its critical mass of amusements[... On the other,] this is one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. There are 50,000 people who live in Coney Island who don't have adequate services, who don't have adequate retail, don't have jobs, and lack basic infrastructure.<sup>93</sup>

Notwithstanding its shortcomings, Coney Island does enjoy a great advantage as a development site: its name. It has “one of the great brand names in the entire world, the birthplace of the modern amusement park.”<sup>94</sup> Currently, however, the neighborhood does not live up to its reputation. “Its amusements haven’t kept pace with changing times and tastes, and for much of the year, activity in the area lags badly.”<sup>95</sup> The district’s primary attractions consist solely of: the beach; a boardwalk with meager amenities; the Aquarium and KeySpan Park, which do manage to draw significant crowds; and a handful of amusements, which still appeal to some.<sup>96</sup> “The rides, however, are too few in number and too old-fashioned to attract today’s amusement park visitors.”<sup>97</sup> Most of the area’s operations are seasonal and leave visitors with little to do when they shut down during winter months. Additionally, the district’s commercial corridors have little “curb appeal.” Many of the storefronts are run down and, collectively, lack a sense of coherence. Finally, vast stretches of land beyond the core amusement area remain persistently vacant and in the hands of multiple owners—an ownership pattern that hinders the development of the lots.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Seth Pinsky, interview by Amy Nicholson. March 18, 2009.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Bloomberg as quoted in Sederstrom 2007f.

<sup>96</sup> Ernst & Young LLP. “Coney Island Strategic Development Plan,” technical memo, 9.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., technical memo, 9.

The viability of Coney Island's redevelopment ultimately depends on future demand within the relevant demographic markets.<sup>99</sup> For this project, those markets include the core Coney Island neighborhood, the area west of Ocean Parkway, the community board, the borough of Brooklyn, the city, and the greater New York City region. The international and national market are not considered in this analysis because other New York City attractions are in a better position than Coney Island to capture most of that market share.

Current trends within the relevant markets are somewhat encouraging. Over the next five years, the already significant 2003 population base of Brooklyn and of the submarkets is expected to increase, in the case of the borough by 2.4%, and to remain stable in the case of the community board. While the median household income in Brooklyn and in the submarkets lags well behind the city's, it is expected to increase, boosting the areas' already substantial buying power. This tendency is already apparent in the neighborhood of Brighton Beach, adjacent to Coney Island, where incomes and housing prices have been rising at a rapid rate. Demographic trends are not as positive in the Coney Island neighborhood itself, where a decline in population is expected. Median household incomes, however, should increase to \$24,300 over the next five years. Moreover, the depressed conditions of the core neighborhood should not dim the positive outlook of the broader markets, where buying power should markedly increase.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 12.

| Market Area             | Total Population | Total Households | Median Household Income | Selected Retail Expenditures |
|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Core Area            | 75,139           | 29,428           | \$22,135                | \$234 million                |
| 2. Submarket 1          | 41,841           | 16,886           | \$26,494                | \$147 million                |
| 3. Submarket 2 – CB 13  | 98,761           | 39,275           | \$23,478                |                              |
| 4. PMA - Brooklyn       | 2.5 million      | 742,545          | \$35,248                | \$14 billion                 |
| 5. Five Boroughs of NYC | 8.1 million      | 3,055,735        | \$43,292                | \$52 billion                 |
| 6. Regional Area        | 13.6 million     | 5,000,000        | \$49,543                | \$99 billion                 |

Table 1: Demographic Analysis. Ernst & Young LLP. *Coney Island Strategic Development Plan*, technical memo 13.

Despite its mixed demographic outlook, Coney Island has seen a range of positive developments in recent years that provide “solid indicators that future development concepts can be reasonably expected to capture from a larger market, while providing quality neighborhood retail and recreation to the local area.”<sup>100</sup> These include the Stillwell Avenue station improvements, the planned expansion of the Aquarium, and the construction of the Oceana, a high-end residential project in Brighton Beach. Major projects and development throughout the rest of the borough, such as the new Nets arena, the Brooklyn Museum expansion, and the new Brooklyn Bridge Park, also offer encouraging signs of a growing market. The ability of a development plan for Coney Island to address this market will be crucial to its success.

Several successful mixed-use districts offer useful lessons for the redevelopment of Coney Island. Times Square, the most famous crossroads in New York City, has shed its former seedy reputation and become a thriving intersection of commerce and culture thanks to a large-scale intervention led by a public-private partnership.<sup>101</sup> Tivoli Gardens, a historic 30 acre gated amusement park in

<sup>100</sup> Ernst & Young LLP, “Coney Island Strategic Development Plan,” technical memo 15.  
<sup>101</sup> Ibid., technical memo 10.

Copenhagen, Denmark, has remained a thriving destination because of the variety of attractions it offers throughout the year. Santa Monica and Venice Beach, old waterfront amusement areas in California, have enjoyed a revitalization despite their few remaining historic amusements, because they are “part of [...] stable communit[ies] where market rate housing and retail attract residents and tourists.”<sup>102</sup> Finally, the New York City neighborhood of Greenwich Village and the New Orleans French Quarter both offer examples of districts that succeed as both tourist destinations and residential neighborhoods due to their character and lively street life. “Constant upgrades to retail, entertainment and residential development in Greenwich Village has resulted in increased residential and retail pricing, the ability of retail and entertainment to capture a bigger share of the regional market and a more vigorous, attractive quality of life for local residents and merchants.”<sup>103</sup> The French Quarter, meanwhile, offers a good example of “branding an image”—leveraging the two-week Mardi Gras festival to foster a vibrant atmosphere every night of the year.

Beyond drawing lessons from successful examples, planning an “authentic place that draws upon Coney Island history and resources to create a year round community for residents and visitors”<sup>104</sup> requires careful consideration of recent trends in the various applicable industries. Coney Island’s cornerstone, the amusement and theme park industry, finds itself in difficulty. These days, most entertainment spending happens in venues that offer a variety of retail, food, and services. Amusement parks that focus primarily on rides miss out on this spending. To make matters worse, amusement rides appeal predominantly to the narrow and

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., technical memo 17.

relatively poor market base of visitors aged under 25. As a result, amusement park revenue in the United States has slowed down. Perhaps in response, the industry has moved away from proprietor operators and consolidated itself under a handful of major corporations that tend to also be in the entertainment and cinema business.

Other trends to consider in evaluating Coney Island redevelopment options include: the contraction of neighborhood carnivals; the expansion of cinema spectaculars, high-end circus productions, and stand-alone water parks; and the convergence of shopping and entertainment.<sup>105</sup> On the one hand, theme parks have diversified, sometimes operating in support of other uses such as shopping malls, and often incorporating hotels and conference space as a way of complementing their sources of revenue. On the other, retail and services increasingly incorporate into their business models entertainment and performance components.<sup>106</sup> Examples include the Mills Corp shopping mall, entertainment restaurants such as ESPN Zone and Dave & Busters, Las Vegas hotels like the Bellagio and the Venetian, as well as numerous mixed-use and street retail projects aimed at creating pedestrian destinations. Although these types of development have further eroded the amusement park market, they also offer hybrid models that could attract larger crowds than those traditionally drawn to Coney Island.

Two other industries merit our attention. In the realm of sports, KeySpan Park's failure to catalyze new development should not discourage the consideration of complementary recreational venues that might augment and capture spending by

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., technical memo 18.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., technical memo 19.

stadium visitors.<sup>107</sup> These might include sports museums, extreme sports expos, and body building infrastructure. Finally, in terms of cultural and event programming, numerous trends relevant to Coney Island have included: a spike in museum attendance; the incorporation of entertainment elements into the museum experience; a proliferation of art projects consisting of immersive environments; and an increase in the capacity of event marketing to target specific audiences.<sup>108</sup> These tendencies compel the consideration of a unique program of culture and events. Such a program would form part of “a mix of elements including entertainment, sports, amusements, restaurants, and retail, that [would] build a total Coney Island experience that has vitality in all seasons and at all times of the day.”<sup>109</sup>

In the final analysis, then, the successful redevelopment of Coney Island requires a departure from the current model, which consists mostly of independent, outdoor rides and attractions. In order for amusements to be feasible in Coney Island, as in all places with cold seasons, they must be complemented with other uses.<sup>110</sup>

The industry now, its biggest attractions, its biggest drivers for population and visitorship are what's called dark rides. At Universal, it's the Spiderman ride, it's a completely indoors vertical stacked ride where you're on a roller coaster in a dark environment with all kinds of special effects. It's virtual reality rides. If you want a Coney Island that's more open, I challenge you to find an amusement park built anywhere in the world—a true amusement park, not carnival rides—but an amusement park anywhere in the world in the last five years that's all open. Because we haven't found it and what we've understood is the model doesn't exist.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., technical memo 20.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., technical memo 21.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

A change in the composition of uses within the amusement area would not only bring Coney Island up to date with contemporary amusement industry standards, but also make available the necessary resources to update the neighborhood and upgrade its attractions. Exciting rides are expensive.<sup>112</sup> A successful redevelopment strategy must therefore, in keeping with industry trends, seek the backing of huge corporations with deep pockets and try to achieve cross-subsidies from entertainment retail and hotels, for which there is a growing and untapped demand.<sup>113</sup>

### C. The City's Plan

The redevelopment of Coney Island would benefit both the local community and the city at large.<sup>114</sup> New development would attract investment to the neighborhood, create opportunities for its residents, generate revenues for municipal coffers, and allow the city to accommodate the anticipated growth in population.<sup>115</sup>

Oh, and the taxes from all the, you know, the housing that's gonna be there. The population growth that we can accommodate there. The retail... not just the tourists.... But it's also what it does in the community, you know, and that's a really, really important part of what we're trying to do.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Seth Pinsky, interview by Amy Nicholson. March 18, 2009.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Lieber (Deputy Mayor for Economic Development), interview by Amy Nicholson, July 7, 2009. Unpublished transcript of raw footage for documentary film.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.; Amanda Burden (Director of New York City Department of Planning), interview with Amy Nicholson. April 14, 2009. Unpublished transcript of raw footage for documentary film.

<sup>116</sup> Robert Lieber, interview by Amy Nicholson, July 7, 2009.

A revitalized Coney Island would address local resident needs, such as jobs, affordable housing, retail, and infrastructure. It would also save the neighborhood's iconic nature by reversing the decline of the amusement district.<sup>117</sup> In terms of its overall vision, the redevelopment plan seeks to:

- Capitalize on the Coney Island image and brand. Sell nostalgia for the original "American Seaside Resort." Build upon the past to create a new future by preserving and reusing fragments of history ("You can recapture some of the glory in the iconic history and nature of what Coney Island was but fast forward it to the 21st century [so that] it can build upon what its history and its legacy is."<sup>118</sup>)
- Create a place of total immersion, belief suspended in a conceptual environment.
- Search for appropriate community and residential development responses that are inclusive. New development must resonate with the existing culture and community of Coney Island. It must capture the imagination of local people and enlist their participation.
- Embrace the context—Brighton Beach, Seagate, Brooklyn.
- Recognize the imperative to guarantee a clean, save and secure destination for tourists, residents, and visitors from the Coney Island area, Brooklyn, the metropolitan area and elsewhere.
- Visitor friendly infrastructure with user-friendly bathrooms, changing rooms and signage.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Seth Pinsky, interview by Amy Nicholson. March 18, 2009.

<sup>118</sup> Robert Lieber, interview by Amy Nicholson, July 7, 2009.

<sup>119</sup> CIDC, "Coney Island Strategic Plan," technical memo 25.

In order to achieve these goals, new development must strike a balance between year-round residential amenities and visitor attractions. It must also undertake design improvements meant to convey a “real and authentic’ new district.”<sup>120</sup> This will require a “substantial private sector investment.”<sup>121</sup> The envisioned program would consist of:

- Diversified housing to create a more balanced mixed-income community in appropriate locations.
- A rich mix of elements including entertainment, sports, amusements, retail, restaurants, culture and events, the boardwalk all within a comprehensive program of urban design and streetscape improvements.
- New retail to serve residents and visitors
- Recreation—both active and passive—because it is part of the Coney Island experience
- Entertainment—need day and night places to eat, drink, watch and play.
- Lodging and conference components for year-round activity.
- Technology—futuristic amusement and events.<sup>122</sup>

This redevelopment plan envisions the day when:

People [traveling] to New York [will] stay an extra day [and] come out to Coney Island. They can stay in hotels there with their family; they can go to a baseball game; they can then go on the rides and the amusements; they can get up in the morning with their children, go to the aquarium, and then get in the car and in 15 minutes they’ll be at Kennedy [Airport] and on their

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., technical memo 26.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., technical memo 27.

way [to] wherever they wanna go. If [the City] can use that as a tool to get people to come and stay longer, it's great for [its] tourism economy.<sup>123</sup>

An increase in tourism spending within the neighborhood would then generate benefits for local businesses and residents.

[The redevelopment area] sits in between two really nice neighborhoods in Brighton Beach and Seagate. [But there is] a lot of public housing in Coney Island. What [the City is] trying to do is to upgrade the overall neighborhood and provide more opportunities for people who do well in the neighborhood to stay in the neighborhood. It's [not] going to be wholesale gentrification at all. It's going to be primarily residents, people who work in the neighborhood.<sup>124</sup>

To achieve the contemplated redevelopment goals, the neighborhood would have to be rezoned. The current zoning is "no longer compatible with the modern sensibilities for amusement parks and for the types of retail and services that [...] the neighborhood needs."<sup>125</sup> For one, its lack of height limits and built form regulation make it "totally unpredictable and confusing and really not very good for economic development."<sup>126</sup> For another, it does not allow the development formula that has proven successful in parks around the world<sup>127</sup>—a mix of year-round attractions, sit-down restaurants, and hotels.

In addition to a change in zoning, the redevelopment of Coney Island requires an aggregation of ownership and coordination of its various moving parts.<sup>128</sup> It is the only way to make a project of this scale economically viable. The best way to accomplish this is by having the City acquire control of the land. Such an

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<sup>123</sup> Robert Lieber, interview by Amy Nicholson, July 7, 2009.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Seth Pinsky, interview by Amy Nicholson. March 18, 2009.

<sup>126</sup> Amanda Burden, interview with Amy Nicholson. April 14, 2009.

<sup>127</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

<sup>128</sup> Robert Lieber, interview by Amy Nicholson, July 7, 2009.

acquisition and the subsequent creation of public parkland would offer several advantages. First, it would afford the City the control necessary to ensure long-term adherence to the plan's public goals, including the preservation of the amusement area as a destination for affordable seaside recreation.

And very, very, very critical is that we always have that feeling in Coney Island that it's open from the water to the beach to the boardwalk to the amusements. The area always has to be accessible so you can walk in. It always has to be affordable. It always has to be open to every age, every race, every class, the way it always has been. It's completely symbolic of what New York is like. You come on a boat to Statue of Liberty, you come—it welcomes everyone. That's Coney Island. It never can be a gated amusement park. It has to be beach, boardwalk, open amusements to everybody. And that's the only way it can be and that's why the City has to take control to assure that. Its not a Six Flags, it's not some slick amusement park. It's Coney Island. And only the City can make that happen.<sup>129</sup>

Only the City can make sure it's the kind of amusement park that Coney Island is: that it's open and has these fun unexpected things, it has old and crazy and Shoot the Freak and everything in there that we've always expected. If you have a mix of a private developer owning some and the City owning some, it's not going to ensure that the public has access and that it has the same feeling as Coney Island.<sup>130</sup>

If you [diverged from the plan] you would lose the world's first amusement park forever because the rides and the entertainment and the kitschy nature and a place that's affordable for people to go with their families for entertainment during the week or on the weekend will be lost forever. It'll be just another place for people to live and shop.<sup>131</sup>

A second advantage of parkland is that its demapping and alienation requires state action. This makes it harder to undo than zoning restrictions, revisions to which only require a City Council vote. As a result, a parkland status would provide a greater level of protection to amusement uses than the C7 designation.

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<sup>129</sup> Amanda Burden, interview with Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Robert Lieber, interview by Amy Nicholson, July 7, 2009.

If you really wanna try and preserve and enhance and leverage the iconic nature of Coney Island, our view is the best way to do that is to preserve the amusements by keeping them on parkland, so the underlying use of that land can't change.<sup>132</sup>

The only way the amusement park can be preserved in perpetuity [...is to map] it as parkland in perpetuity. You cannot undo that. If you map it as parkland—as an amusement park—then nobody can build on it ever, unless they go for state legislature to take that park mapping off it.<sup>133</sup>

Finally, the creation of parkland would make possible the demapping, alienation, and private development of the waterfront parkland that abuts KeySpan Park. The State generally opposes the elimination of parkland unless it is counter-balanced by the creation of an equivalent amount of parkland. Additional land acquired by the City could fulfill this requirement and could therefore make the KeySpan parking lot available for some of the project's other development goals.

[The new parkland would protect] the amusement district so it's preserved forever. That's part of what we need to do for Coney Island. Then, the area north of Surf Avenue and west of KeySpan Park, that can be a new neighborhood. With beautiful apartment buildings, but with affordable housing, with ground level stores, with a supermarket, maybe a Gap, maybe a Duane Reade, maybe the things that ... all of the things that the Coney Island neighborhood needs.<sup>134</sup>

In light of the foregoing considerations, the plan for the redevelopment of Coney Island contemplates, first of all, the preservation of amusement uses within 9.39 acres of mapped parkland and the construction of a "27-acre, year-round amusement and entertainment district with open and enclosed amusement and drinking establishments, hotels, and small scale complementary retail."<sup>135</sup> The creation of this new amusement area, along with the upzoning of most of the C7

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Amanda Burden, interview with Amy Nicholson. April 14, 2009.

<sup>134</sup> Amanda Burden, interview with Amy Nicholson. April 14, 2009.

<sup>135</sup> FEIS, S-7.

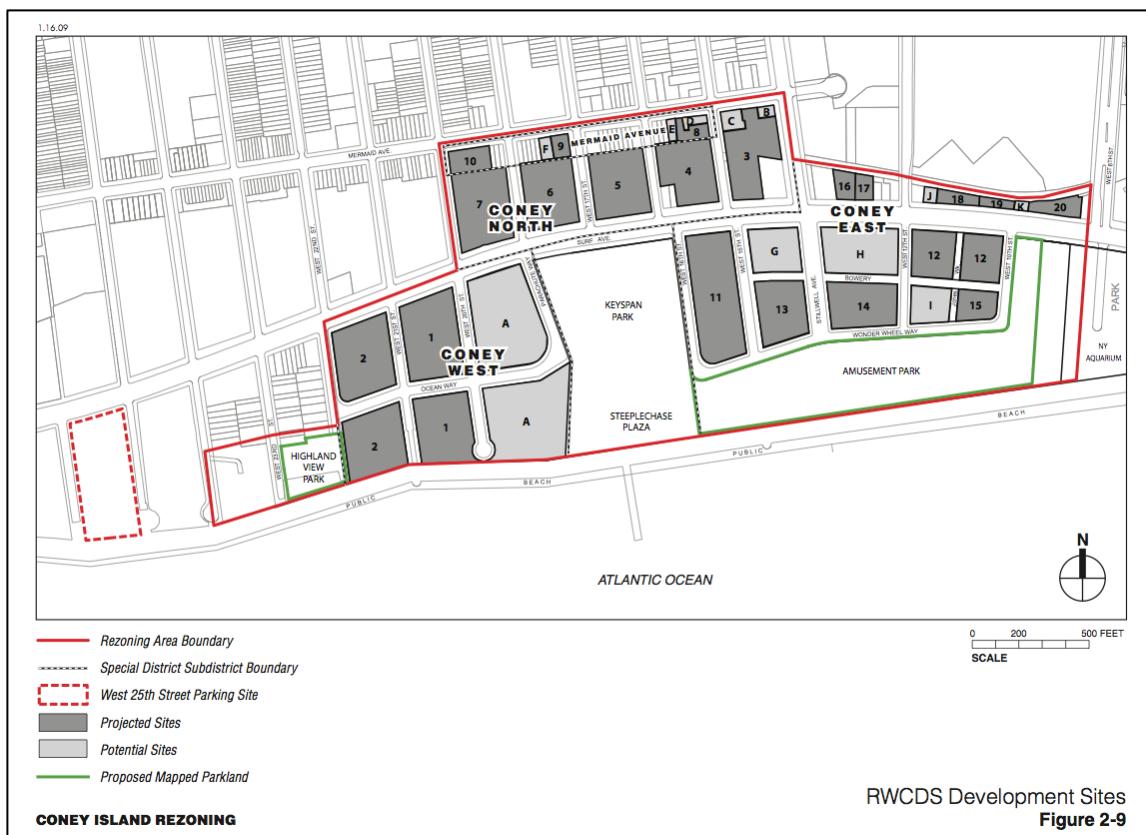
district, will help pave the way for a broader neighborhood revitalization, incentivize the development of vacant land for housing (including affordable housing) and retail, and provide jobs and services for local residents.<sup>136</sup> Through this strategy, the plan will “build on the area’s unique legacy to create a development framework that will respect and enhance Coney Island’s history while providing the basic services and amenities that the existing community lacks.”<sup>137</sup>

The current amusement district would be divided into three subdistricts: Coney East, West, and North. Coney East would stretch from KeySpan Park to the Aquarium south of Surf Avenue, but would also include the lots north of Surf Avenue, between Stillwell Avenue and West 8<sup>th</sup> Street. Coney West would stretch from KeySpan Park to West 22<sup>nd</sup> Street south of Surf Avenue, but would also include the southern portions of the subsequent blocks between West 22<sup>nd</sup> and West 24<sup>th</sup>. Coney North would stretch from Stillwell Avenue to West 20<sup>th</sup> Street between Surf Avenue and Mermaid Avenue. The 9.3 acres of existing parkland west of KeySpan Park would be alienated, rezoned as part of Coney West and sold to a private entity for development in accordance with the allowable uses. The lost parkland would be replaced with the new mapped parkland, which would abut the Boardwalk between KeySpan Park and the Cyclone and stretch north to encompass a portion of the intervening blocks up to Wonder Wheel Way, a newly mapped east-west corridor south of the Bowery. This new park would be devoted to outdoor amusement uses.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 1-7-8

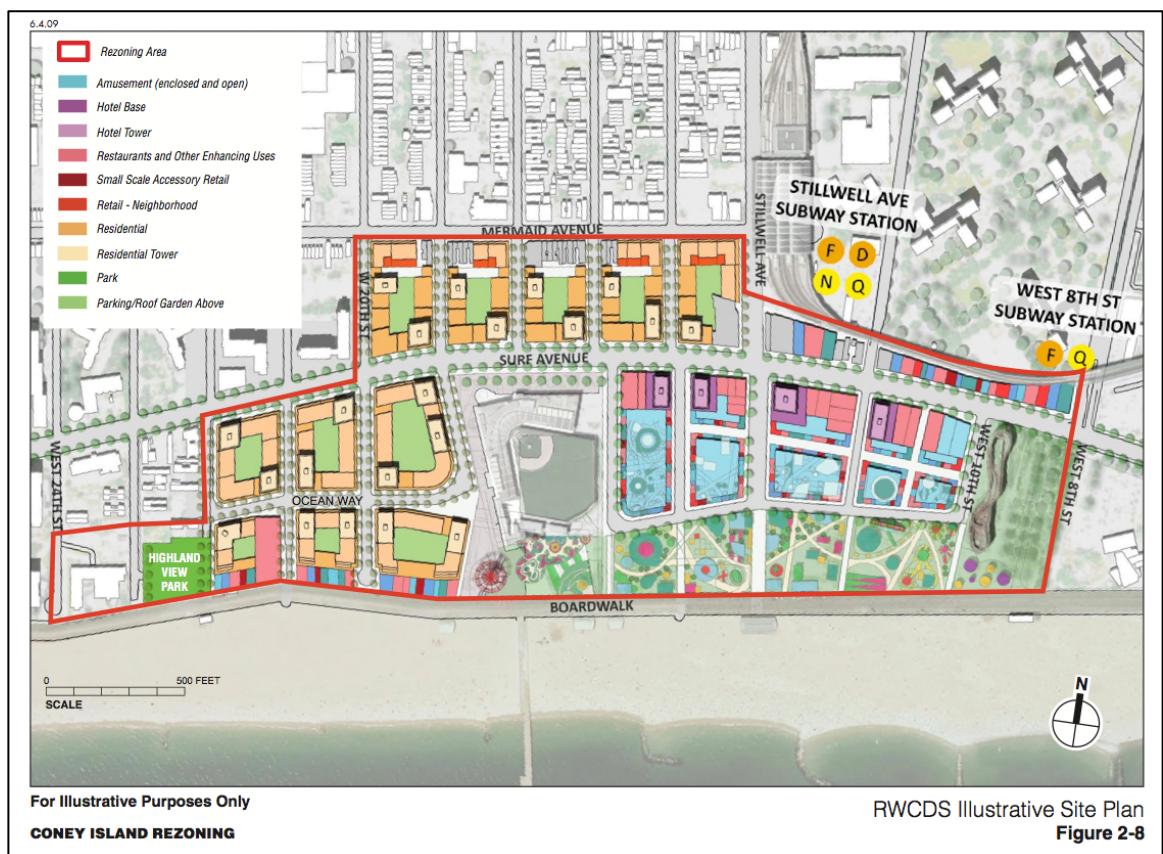
<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 1-8



All subdistricts would be upzoned. In Coney West and North, the zoning would change from C7 to higher density residential zonings with commercial overlays. The maximum commercial FAR would remain at 2.0. The maximum residential FAR would range from 4.75 to 5.8, depending on the block. In Coney East, the zoning would be amended to allow higher densities and a wider range of uses, including hotels and dining and drinking establishment of all sizes.

At least fifty percent of frontages along the Bowery and Wonder Wheel Way would have to consist of amusements. The maximum FAR throughout Coney East would increase from 2.0 to 2.6, except on the blocks fronting the south side of Surf Avenue, where it would increase to 4.0 between West 10<sup>th</sup> Street and West 12<sup>th</sup>

Street and to 4.5 from West 12<sup>th</sup> Street to West 16<sup>th</sup> Street. Additional bulk regulations would limit the height of Coney East towers east of West 12<sup>th</sup> Street to 150' and those west of West 12<sup>th</sup> Street to 220' or 270', depending on lot size. Non-tower Coney East buildings would be capped at 60', 65', or 85', depending on the block. In Coney West and North, towers fronting Surf Avenue would be capped at 220' or 270', and those fronting the Boardwalk would be capped at 170'. Non-tower buildings in these districts would be limited to heights between 85' and 105', depending on the block.



## XII. Chronicle (Part II)

### **Enter Save Coney Island**

Some of the people who had publicly defended the City's original plan and commended the administration's resistance to Thor's proposals felt betrayed by the amended zoning recommendations. Albert called the revisions "crushingly disappointing." Denson, who regarded the initial plan as a compromise, called the new one a capitulation. Carlin downgraded to dismal her optimistic outlook for the season. Only Zigun, the sole CIDC board member from the amusement area, held back, reserving his comments until he could learn more (deMause 2008a). A little over a week later, CI USA, Carlin, and Denson announced that they would mark Coney Island's opening day with a demonstration against the City's plan (Robau 2008d). Protesters included members of community groups such as the Polar Bear Club and assorted amusement supporters who shared a sense that the new plan threatened to turn the area into a large mall (Calder 2008d). At the event, the demonstrators joined in "save Coney Island" songs and chants, punctuated Kelly's short opening-day speech with boos, and Recchia's with taunts of "you suck". Recchia explained afterwards that "some people don't like change" (deMause 2008b). This was the first of numerous protests organized against the City's plan by this loose coalition. Along the way, "Save Coney Island" gradually became more than a rallying cry. It coalesced into an advocacy organization.

A few days after the first SCI demonstration against the City's zoning changes, Zigun issued an open letter of resignation from the CIDC board, effective June 24 at 6:00pm, the scheduled date and time of the scoping session for the revised plan. He had been persuaded not to quit immediately after the City's announcement, but felt manipulated upon learning that the City had scheduled the scoping session to take place before the CIDC board could address the changes at its next meeting (deMause 2008c). Zigun's letter urged the City to withdraw its plan, criticizing its substance as well as the process that had led to it (Robau 2008e). He complained that the plan would turn the amusement area into a shopping mall and reproached the City for brushing aside the Strategic Plan without giving the CIDC board an opportunity to discuss or vote on the changes. Kelly countered that the board's role was to oversee the creation of a plan, not to vote on it, but left unexplained why the plan had changed without any board oversight. She added that the retail within the amusement area would have an entertainment component, citing as examples the rock-climbing wall at Niketown and the Sony store's video game displays (Sederstrom 2008a).

The week after Zigun's letter, city officials announced an investigation of Zigun in response to a New York Post article reporting that the impresario had been living in the CI USA building (Calder 2008e). This violated the terms of the city grant used by CI USA to purchase its venue—terms stipulating that the building would be used exclusively “for the benefit of the people of the city” (*ibid.*): Kelly expressed surprise at the Post's revelation. Reacting to the coverage, Zigun offered reporters a tour of the office where he had been sleeping on a pull-out couch and announced that he would be immediately moving out.

Zigun's letter of resignation coincided with the period of preparations for CI USA's biggest day of the season, the Mermaid Parade. Taking advantage of the heightened media attention during the lead-up to the event, Zigun published a critical opinion piece that portrayed the City's plan as part of a long history of municipal neglect and hostility toward the amusement district (Zigun 2008). He characterized the changes to the plan—the shrunken amusement area and the location of the new hotels—as an existential threat to Coney Island and as a betrayal of the long process that had led to the City's initial proposal. Zigun's increasingly public stance against the administration entailed a risk, since CI USA, like most local organizations in the neighborhood, depended heavily on financial support from municipal sources. Nonetheless, the "mayor" did not mince words in his attack, countering the City's "it's this or nothing" response with a stark choice of his own: "If the City gets its way, it won't be Coney Island anymore. And if we lose Coney Island now, it will be gone forever" (*Ibid.*).

The Mermaid Parade, a procession of extravagantly and scantily costumed mermaids, mermen, and assorted nautical creatures nominally celebrating the summer solstice—as well as the largest arts parade in the country—typically deals in titillation, not political agitation. That summer, however, it would serve as a political platform. The political placards incorporated into the event's poster that year announced as much.



Figure 21: Poster for 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Mermaid Parade

The year's honorary King Neptune and Queen Mermaid, the political performance artists Reverend Billy (Pastor of the Church of Stop Shopping) and Savitri D, worked up the crowd with bullhorns, lambasting the City's development plan. Other participants also got in on the action: a marching band led chants of "save Coney Island," an advocate dressed as the Norse god Thor flaunted a model-sized set of condos; and a man dressed in black spandex clutched fake dollar bills, shouting about the high-rise future of Coney Island (Correal 2008). As the parade unfolded, SCI volunteers distributed fliers, publicizing the upcoming scoping session and listing a set of demands:

**The Save Coney Island Coalition says yes to revitalizing Coney's world famous amusement zone!**

NO to 26 New High Rises of up to 30 stories each in the current

Amusement District

NO to Retail, Malls or "Entertainment Retail" in the Amusement District!

NO to shrinkage of the Amusement District from 61 acres to 9 acres!

YES to preserving Amusement Zoning in the Amusement District!!

YES to keeping Coney Island the People's Playground--providing accessible Amusements for ALL to enjoy!! (Robau 2009a)

To raise further public awareness, Mermaid Savitri D announced a three-day, webcast hunger strike that would take place in a CI USA display window and last until the day of the hearing (Sederstrom 2008b). Asked about her objective, she explained:

Coney Island is a place where people of all races and all classes can hang out together, and there's like two of those places in New York right now—and I can't think of what the other one is right now. This otherwise dull scoping hearing could determine the fate of this democratized amusement zone that we all know and love. But while we can love it all we want, we have to show up, and love it on the record. (deMause 2008d)

Finally, on the eve of the scoping session, she appeared, along with Charles Denson, on Brian Lehrer's popular public radio show, giving the hearing one final round of publicity.

### **Lincoln High**

The build up for the scoping session all but ensured a well-attended and raucous affair, even by Coney Island standards. The presentation of the City's revised plan

was delivered at Lincoln High School by Brooklyn City Planning Director Purnima Kapur with the aid of new illustrations. These depicted a carnivalesque corridor replete with generic amusements (and no obvious retail establishment) from a street-level perspective that kept out of frame any structure taller than a two stories (Robau 2008h). Unlike the previous set of illustrations, these were rendered in lively watercolors, using quick strokes that avoided detail except for the occasional Coney Island reference. Lively coloring and allusive style notwithstanding, Kapur's presentation was repeatedly drowned out with boos and heckles (Nicholason 2012).

Public testimony was split. Most supporters of the plan emphasized the need for jobs within the residential community, casting the project as a rare and long awaited opportunity for local development. Opponents inveighed against the revisions to the plan and called for a return to the original proposal. Some strayed from traditional styles of testimony and delivered sermons (Reverend Billy), songs, and thinly veiled personal attacks. Savitri, who remained in mermaid costume and arrived straight from her hunger strike, asked the crowd, "Who is this plan for? Is it for a developer? Is it for an elected's legacy? Is it for an elected's pocket?"

Kelly declared herself gratified by the proceedings, "I'm actually glad that people came out tonight so that we can hear their opinions and modify the scope accordingly" (Robau 2008g).

### **“The Summer of Hate”<sup>158</sup>**

As the controversy escalated, the 2008 season was winding down and the future of Astroland once more hung in the balance. Albert made numerous attempts starting in June to negotiate a 2-year extension to her lease. But she received no response from Thor (deMause 2008e). Finally, at the end of August, she issued a second deadline—September 4 at 1:00pm—after which she would close down Astroland if she didn’t have an agreement in hand. Thor accused Albert in the media of “giv[ing] up on Coney Island,” pointing out that her lease ran through January (McShane 2008). Albert countered in an open letter that beyond not wanting to leave her employees in limbo any longer, she needed to sell her rides 8 to 10 months in advance of the next season in order to vacate the premises before her lease expired and in order to avoid Thor’s hefty fees for failing to do so (Robau 2008m).

The deadline passed without any further communication between Thor and Albert. On the final day of the season, tearful longtime employees said good-bye and ride operators occasionally went off-script, calling out, “I don’t want no shopping malls here!” (deMause 2008e). At closing time, the gates shut down for good, and Astroland’s 46<sup>th</sup> and final season in Coney Island came to an end (Calder 2008g).

The City, which had publicly called for a lease renewal, accused Thor of deliberately blighting the amusement area in order to increase its negotiating leverage. It also used the closing of Astroland as an opportunity to promote its rezoning:

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<sup>158</sup> deMause 2008f.

[This should be a] wake-up call to those who have stood back and watched as the fate of Coney Island has been left in limbo without any safeguards for its future. This further underscores the need for the City's comprehensive rezoning plan as the only hope for preserving the amusement area and bringing the necessary jobs, infrastructure and affordable housing to the neighborhood. (Acitelli 2008)

SCI had distributed 10,000 fliers in Astroland during the amusement park's final days asking visitors to call City Hall and demand its intervention. There were subsequent reports by an anonymous city source that the administration was negotiating a short-term lease extension for Astroland in the hopes of moving the amusement park to another location the following summer (Sederstrom 2008c). In a follow-up press conference, the Mayor confirmed the report and lamented the possibility of losing the amusement park (deMause 2008f). Believing that its campaign had had some effect, SCI launched another flier campaign, this time asking people to contact Recchia, the Mayor, and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and demand changes to the City's revised plan (Robau 2008n). The weeks passed, however, without that initiative having any discernible effect. As Albert continued to remove her amusement rides, it also became clear to everyone that Astroland would not get a reprieve this year. Local businesses were left to contemplate the possibility of opening next season in a largely vacant amusement area.

## XIII. SCI

Why stage a demonstration? Participating in them and organizing them as a volunteer can feel like a thankless proposition. They take time. Attendance is unpredictable, media coverage uncertain, and effectiveness often undeterminable. Those who brush aside those concerns and invest themselves in this sort of agitation have grievances and lack alternative ways of having those addressed. This chapter unpacks SCI's concerns and explores the origin of the group's political demands. The first section gives a profile of the group's members, paying especial attention to their connection to Coney Island. The second offers a portrait of the amusement area—a sort of impressionistic walking tour—based on anecdotes and descriptions by the amusement advocates and complemented by historical resources that they commonly referenced. The third section examines the shared representations by which SCI members defined Coney Island. And the fourth deals with the experiential qualities of the neighborhood, describing what the amusement advocates took to be the quintessential Coney Island experience. Having covered the interrelated material, representational, and experiential bases that grounded the advocates' view of Coney Island, the final section looks at the development visions that this perspective inspired.

### A. Who Was SCI?

Save Coney Island started out less as a group than as a rallying cry—a banner for demonstrations against development plans proposed for the amusement area. Protesters consisted primarily of Coney Island regulars whom Dianna Carlin had organized through word-of-mouth and social networking. Many of them knew

each other from local clubs, from having worked together, or simply from hanging out at local establishments such as Ruby's Bar and Grill or Coney Island USA. Repeat participants gave the group its initial organizational core. Dozens of meeting and presentations arranged by the City and other interested organizations provided ample opportunity for discussion and for early SCI members to meet like-minded people and exchange their concerns. This helped the group grow and eventually develop the necessary infrastructure to disseminate information and coordinate an advocacy campaign. Mass mailings, petition drives, rallies, and media coverage gradually increased both SCI's public profile and its ranks, adding over three thousand subscribers to its mailing list.

The lack of formal membership requirements complicates any generalization about SCI's constituents and blurs the difference between its "members" and sympathizers. Thousands signed the group's petitions, hundreds participated in its rallies, dozens sent contributions, and an unknown quantity contacted elected officials. However one measures, the group did not take long to move well beyond the semi-cohesive crew of Coney Island regulars who marched at the first SCI rally. Some supporters did not frequent Coney Island. Some did not live in New York City. A few did not even live in the United States. Even the group's core members became more diverse, leaving as their primary common ground a shared affinity for Coney Island's amusement district and a set of political demands.

The following account of SCI focuses exclusively on the group's most active participants—whom I'll refer to as advocates or SCI members—and relies primarily on interviews with them. This sub-group is not necessarily representative

of the organization as a whole. For one, a key selection criterion—participation in SCI demonstrations and public hearings—tends to exclude those who work day jobs with inflexible hours. As a result, the profile and views of this sub-group may not necessarily reflect those of the rest of the membership. Nonetheless, these were the advocates who led and shaped SCI's involvement in the planning process. Moreover, their committed participation in that process suggests a heavy investment in the future of the Coney Island. The object my query—the motivations that gave rise to SCI's opposition—therefore justifies my narrow focus and my expectation that this select group offers a window into deeply held views of the neighborhood. If SCI protesters had been a homogenous group with a similar connection to Coney Island—had they, for instance, consisted primarily of amusement park employees—then the impetus behind the group's demonstrations might have been self-evident or easily ascertained. That not being the case, a few words about the advocates' backgrounds and links to the amusement area are in order.

## **Background**

Most advocates hailed from New York City's five boroughs and resided within an hour from Coney Island. A few among them were native New Yorkers, who counted in their ranks a small number of native Coney Islanders. Most of them, however, had come from other urban, suburban, and rural parts of the country, including the Tri-state area, New England, the Midwest, the West Coast, and the South. By and large, they had arrived in New York as students or shortly after graduating from college. Because ages within the group ranged from twenty-something to seventy-something, this meant that some advocates had lived in the city for over three decades, while others only for a few months. They worked or

had worked as journalists, lawyers, architects, engineers, health providers, publicists, business owners, civil servants, painters, actors, directors, dancers, and photographers. A few were retired or unemployed.

SCI members had very little prior experience in political activism. A handful of them had participated in at least one advocacy campaign (e.g., the repeal of the Cabaret Laws, which prohibit dancing in bars without a dancing license, and the rezoning of Williamsburg, Brooklyn in 2005); and a few had more extensive experience with planning and preservation issues. The advocates found out about the Coney Island redevelopment plans through a number of sources: newspapers, chat rooms of local business websites, postcards at local establishments, and local gossip. They volunteered in various capacities, depending on their disposition and availability. They collected petition signatures, passed out literature, called local representatives, took part in rallies and publicity stunts, volunteered professional services, and attended and testified at public hearings. The advocates' reasons for getting involved varied as much as their connection to Coney Island.

### **Encounters and Impressions**

SCI members first experienced Coney Island at different points in their lives and at different points in the history of the area. The oldest among them, if they first visited the amusement area as children, would have done so during the 1940s, 50s or early 60s, when Steeplechase remained the neighborhood's main attraction. Younger ones and those who first visited as adults would have first done so during subsequent decades—during the 1970s or 80s, when the amusement area had much declined in size and reputation, or during the 1990s or 00s, when a few new businesses and attractions had started to enhance its profile. Countless factors

beyond timing and age, however, determined the quality of those visits. Individual temperament and happenstance can mean the difference between enduring affection and aversion. One person might have been transfixed by their first taste of candy apple; another might have come to regret having eaten one so shortly before riding the Cyclone. That said, advocates uniformly remembered their first visits with fondness. Some recalled being awestruck as children by the size and energy of the park. Others remembered being captivated as adults by the area's "old-world" charm and even by its dilapidation and vaguely threatening air.

First visits to Coney Island seldom were the advocates' first exposure to the place. They had typically come across multiple representations of the area well before they ever laid eyes on it. Older members, particularly those native to New York, often grew up hearing stories from relatives about past visits, some of which harked back to the time of the area's three famous amusement parks. Those who did not still had seen countless depictions of Coney Island in movies, print, and song. Virtually no one who came of age during the mid-century could recall a time when they had not heard of Coney. They describe it as something that was just "in the air."<sup>139</sup>

Younger advocates' pre-visit exposure to Coney Island varied to a much larger extent. Almost all of them, however, had at least heard the name (although some associated it with copycat "Coney Island" amusement parks closer to home) and had known that the neighborhood was or had been an old beachside place for amusements, performance, and recreation. Most had also had a sense that the area

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<sup>139</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 15, 2012 and February 28, 2013.

had fallen into disrepair. These impressions often arose from a common set of sources, particularly the Ric Burns documentary of turn-of-the century Coney Island (Burns 1991), Weegee pictures of mid-century beach crowds, and The Warriors (Hill 1979), a gang movie partly set in a sordid 1970s Coney Island.



**Figure 22: Coney Island, Weegee**

Visits to Coney Island gradually exposed SCI members to other accounts of the area. Some had happened upon the small Coney Island museum atop CI USA or upon the even smaller Coney Island History Project, both of which house artifacts and pictures of the amusement district from early eras. Others had heard stories from local old-timers about Steeplechase Park or about the “rough” period that followed its closure. Beyond visits, interest and luck had often led advocates to Coney Island literature and materials, including notably Charlie Denson's *Coney Island: Lost and Found* (2002).

The extent and quality of engagement with Coney Island's history varied among SCI members. Some had only a passing acquaintance with that history—little beyond a few anecdotes and factoids about the neighborhood's major attractions. Others, though, had a thorough familiarity with numerous aspects of Coney Island's past, having cultivated an interest in it and/or having had personal connections to it. The nature of the advocates' interest in the local history has differed as much as their familiarity with it. For some, it arose from intellectual curiosity about old New York, old Brooklyn, or old amusement parks and rides. Others had engaged with it aesthetically, less like historians than like bricoleurs drawing from eclectic sources for inspiration. For yet others, it had held personal significance. For those with family roots or formative experiences in the area, the local history had provided a way of making sense of their own personal history. But even some who fell short of that types of intimate connection still regarded local folklore as a source of pride and described in epic terms past attractions and innovations, as well as the neighborhood's pioneering role in the development of mass recreation

Exposure to representations of Coney Island informed the advocates' visits to the amusement area just as those visits helped shape their engagement with those representations. This dynamic unfolded across time, with earlier encounters shaping subsequent ones, and subsequent ones retroactively coloring the recollection of the former. For many who first visited Coney Island during the 50s, for instance, Steeplechase Park instilled a lifelong fascination with the neighborhood. Conversely, their memories of that period had been burnished by the contrast between mid-century Coney Island and the diminished amusement

area of the decades that followed. This two-directional process helped define these advocates' perspectives of the neighborhood so that where later visitors saw mere historical vestiges, those who predated them saw evocations of personal encounters with Coney's lost glory. An analogous dynamic informed the views of other members of SCI.

### **The Coney Island Connection**

The advocates' feelings about Coney Island evolved over the course of numerous visits to the area. The nature of those visits varied across time and among the advocates. A number of them, for instance, outgrew their childhood love of amusement rides only to rediscover it as parents. Some discovered Coney Island as a place for recreation and ended up working there; while others came looking for work and ended up becoming Boardwalk regulars. Over the years, then, Coney Island came to occupy a variety of spaces in the advocates' lives.

For the native New Yorkers in the group, Coney Island had been a place of childhood fun and adventure—a “personal urban exotica”<sup>140</sup>—and had become a place of childhood memories. As adults, almost all SCI members came to frequent the neighborhood at some point in their lives for recreational purposes. While their preferred activities differed and have changed over time, they also tended converge around a series of attractions.

The advocates' visits had typically combined a mix of activities. They often started out as a day at the beach or were organized around one of the season's many spectacles: the weekly fireworks display, a Cyclones game, a concert, or a CI USA

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<sup>140</sup> Interview with advocate, November 13, 2012.

event or performance. These visits would then extend beyond their initial purpose. Advocates uniformly singled out the Boardwalk as an essential destination, because of the bars, shops, vistas, and general hubbub. They also typically visited the amusement area, especially to play arcade games such as Skee-ball. While few of them had gotten on rides as adults as a matter of habit, many had made exceptions when accompanying children or when taking out-of-town visitors to see the Cyclone or the Wonder Wheel. Instead, they usually preferred to simply walk through the amusements and arcades, revel in the excitement, and watch others enjoying themselves.

In describing their visits, advocates underscored not only the large menu of recreational options, but also the many types of visits that Coney Island makes possible. They had turned to the neighborhood as a place for both thrills and relaxation; for socializing with friends and for people-watching and meeting strangers. And throughout these visits, Coney Island had offered both predictable attractions and the pleasures of the unexpected.

For some members of SCI, Coney Island had been more than a place for occasional recreation. It had also offered a social scene in which they had participated to varying degrees. Regulars included local residents who strolled along the Boardwalk on an almost daily basis and had come to regard the amusement area as their backyard. They also included members who worked or had worked in the amusement area in some capacity: operating rides or arcades, helping manage local businesses, putting on performances, or providing art services, such as painting murals or signs. Finally, some advocates had needed neither vicinity nor

employment to become regulars. They had achieved that status by simply being there often—becoming fixtures at local hangouts or frequent participants in local clubs, such as the Polar Bears.

Most members of SCI felt a degree of ownership over Coney Island. For some, this sense arose in connection to the frequency of their visits, which kept them abreast of neighborhood happenings. For others, it related to well-established connections to people and places and to a firsthand familiarity with their backstories. This applied especially to the few who, because of family ties, grew up with privileged access to the amusement area, and had consequently come to regard its history as intertwined with their own. For longstanding regulars, the connection to the neighborhood had been cemented not only by the familiarity and relationships that longevity can entail, but by a prideful sense that they had come to appreciate Coney during decades when many others kept away—a sense that their ties to the area had required discernment and had been hard-earned.

Even some SCI members who had visited Coney Island more sporadically or who had started doing so only more recently harbored proprietary feelings toward the neighborhood. Those who felt a strong connection to New York often viewed the history of the amusement area as a key part of the history of the city. While they visited Coney Island only from time to time, they were nonetheless wary of changes that might undermine the neighborhood's historic function. A few advocates with a more tenuous relation to New York came to share their fellow members' concern. The amusement area reminded them of places they had known back home—old amusement parks or old neighborhoods that had grown in significance by

persisting in the face of development around them. Transferring their feelings for those places onto Coney Island, these advocates had become protective of it, inspired by the fact that, despite extensive changes to the rest of the city, the neighborhood had improbably survived.

### **B. SCI's Tour of Coney Island circa 2002**

This section offers an overview of the Coney Island features that advocates emphasized during their interviews. In order to do justice to the richness and diversity of the advocates' accounts, the narrative aggregates their descriptions and recollections, presenting them in the first person and either in italics, when paraphrased, or in block quotes. For the sake of context and coherence, I have complemented these passages with background material from the two historical sources most commonly alluded to by the members of SCI.

Coney Island is the only beachside amusement park in the city accessible by subway. That doesn't necessarily make it close. It takes about an hour to get there from Manhattan and even longer from the Bronx or Queens. But you can get there for the price of a subway fare and enjoy an entire day's worth of recreation.<sup>141</sup> It's the last stop on the train—Stillwell Avenue Station. *Arriving at that last stop makes you feel like you've left the city behind. When I was younger, I imagined that the subway ride was a special roller coaster that transported me from my everyday neighborhood to an exciting world apart—Coney Island.*<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Interview with advocate, April 22, 2013.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

*The dull view out the subway window for most of the ride sets up the postcard-worthy scene that announces your arrival. It's a view of the beach—which, coming from the city, always surprises—punctuated by an Erector Set skyline that includes the Parachute Jump to the right and the Wonder Wheel to the left. If you're coming in from the eastern side of the district, you first see the old Cyclone roller coaster instead. Regardless of which route you take, that first glimpse gives you a little kick, like you're a perpetual kid on summer vacation and you can't wait to get there.<sup>145</sup> As the skyline grows, this raw excitement happens.<sup>144</sup> Children press against the windows and, as soon as the doors open, they rush out of the train whether it's crowded or not. And they're not the only ones. You don't get that at most other stations. And it is a joyful rush, not like the one of Midtown commuters.<sup>145</sup>*



Figure 23: Arrival in Coney Island

Stillwell Station underwent a large renovation in the mid 2000s, making it less dark, run-down, and intimidating. The bathrooms used to make quite an impression. *On my first visit, I saw a syringe in the toilet. The whole place resembled a movie*

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with advocate, July 22, 2013.

<sup>145</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 22, 2012 and August 10, 2012.

*set.<sup>146</sup> It was fascinating, complex, and in its own way beautiful. You could sense the history of Coney Island walking through it. There was an old lunch counter with little stools that felt like it had been there forever.<sup>147</sup> And then by the entrance, you had Philips' Candy Store, a sort of gateway between the station's gloom and the amusement area, from which wafted a saccharine smell of cotton candy that would strike you as irresistible or repulsive depending on your mood.<sup>148</sup> It sold basic stuff like coffee and cookies; but the attention-getters were the old-fashioned sweets: giant lollipops so enormous that they looked like creatures and those orange circus peanuts that are disgusting everywhere else but awesome there because they were fresh (most people probably don't even realize that they come fresh).<sup>149</sup> Philips' also had beautiful hand-lettered signage on the outside.<sup>150</sup> But then, there was fantastic signage all around you as you left the station, like a Coppertone sign from God knows when, and the old, wooden subway sign. Those were incredible.<sup>151</sup>*

*Coming out of the station always takes you by surprise. You used to get blinded by the sunlight and struck by the cacophony and excitement of the amusements<sup>152</sup> —not so much any more. The light let in by the new station allows your eyes to adjust before you get to the exit; and there are now fewer rides along Surf Avenue. These days, it's the sense of openness that makes the biggest impression—that, and the beach in the distance, which you can smell all the way from the station.<sup>153</sup> You were just in the City; and just like that, you're now at the beach. It's easy to forget that New York is surrounded by water. It's the first beach I ever saw after moving to New York.<sup>154</sup>*

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<sup>146</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with advocate, February 1, 2013.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 22, 2013 and July 11, 2013.

<sup>150</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 11, 2013 and August 2, 2013.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with advocate, August 2, 2012.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

*From outside, you can admire the best part of the station's restoration. That is not to say that the interiors were badly done. They do feel airier, brighter, and cleaner. But a lot of great signage and businesses were lost in the process.* Phillips, which had operated there 24 hours a day since 1930, was forced out (Denson 2002, 269). The City tried to help him relocate temporarily to the ground level of KeySpan Park. But the Mets organization asked for too much money.

*The MTA<sup>155</sup> did a nice job of preserving the historic character of the facade and rebuilding the old tiled sign at the entrance. The new light bulb-outlined tower off to the side was a fine idea marred in execution. It was meant to evoke Luna Park and add a touch of fanciful Coney Island architecture to the project. But it ended up looking like something you'd find at a themed mall<sup>156</sup>.*



Figure 24: Façade, Stillwell Avenue Station

Luna Park used to be just a few blocks to the east of the station, where the Luna Park housing complex now stands. Before Luna Park, that location had been the site of the famous Elephant Hotel, a 150' tall hotel in the shape of an elephant and

<sup>155</sup> The Metropolitan Transit Authority

<sup>156</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2013.

the most whimsical of several fanciful hotels in the neighborhood at the time. It had a canopied howdah on its back that served as an observatory, a museum where the animal's lungs would be, and telescopes for gazing out through the animal's eyes. The colossus burned down a few years before Luna Park opened.

Luna Park was the second and most extravagant of the three large amusement parks that put Coney Island on the map at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was built in 1903 by Fred Thompson and Skip Dundee, after whose sister the park takes its name (Burns 1991). Thompson, who

had been an architecture student, designed the 22-acre park as an architectural fantasia full of highly ornamental and vaguely oriental plaster features: spires and turrets, sculpted fantastic animals, minarets, and swirling pinwheels and crescents,

all mostly colored in white, orange, and gold. At night, 250,000 electric lights outlined the park's structures, amazing visitors at a time when street lighting remained a novelty. It became known as the "Electric Eden" (Denson 2002, 236).



Figure 25: Luna Park Tower at Night

The park's attractions democratized access to exotic locations, incorporating many World Fair attractions such as an Eskimo village, a Japanese Garden, a Venetian City, a Chinese theater, and a Dutch windmill. Trained elephants, dancing girls, marching soldiers, and gilded chariots wandered through the grounds. If

earthbound exoticism was not enough, the “Trip to the Moon,” which simulated a lunar voyage, allowed voyagers to explore lunar grottoes and caverns, where they would encounter costumed giants and midgets (Burns 1991).

Other attractions gave you the transcendent experience of witnessing and surviving famous and not-so-famous misfortunes, such as floods, fires, and naval attacks. Several hit close to home. In “Fire and Flames,” a four-story tenement building was repeatedly set on fire so that firemen could dramatically combat the flames. Others tapped into more far-fetched preoccupations. The “Great Naval Spectatorium” had the navies of Japan, Portugal, and Germany approach and shell Manhattan until intercepted and sunk by Admiral Dewey’s fleet (*ibid.*). Yet another set of attractions consisted of variations on roller coasters and gravity slides, rides that allowed visitors to indulge their fascination with technology and the morbid fantasy of falling victim to its power.

Luna Park was staggeringly successful during its first two decades of operation. During its early years, attendance would regularly exceed 4,000,000 people a season. This success led Thompson and Dundy to expand the park, increasing its size to 38-acres and adding more towers, lights, and attractions, including a 160,000-plant interpretation of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The park’s good fortunes, however, did not last. Personal problems led to Thompson’s bankruptcy and cost him the amusement park (Denson 2002, 26). New management allowed the venue to deteriorate. As it lost its air of opulence and splendor, it also lost its appeal and popularity. Finally, it was destroyed in a series of fires in the mid-40s, until it shut down for good in 1946. Luna Park’s striking imagery, however, has

remained synonymous with historic Coney Island. Its buildings and rides commonly resurface in merchandise and artwork, offering a reminder of the high standard for extravagant design that it set a century ago.

Stillwell Avenue Station is on a corner of Coney Island's main intersection, the crossroads between Surf Avenue, the neighborhood's main commercial strip, which runs east-west, and Stillwell Avenue, which takes you from Surf Avenue to the beach. *From there, you can appreciate much of what makes Coney Island distinctive: the openness, the colors, and the old buildings and signs.<sup>157</sup> You get an immediate impression of a seedy, fascinating place soaked in its own history<sup>158</sup> and a sense that you're somewhere altogether different.<sup>159</sup>* Each corner of the intersection features a Coney Island landmark.

Across Surf Avenue from the station, stands Henderson's Music Hall, an imposing two-story brick building from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that used to operate as a high-end music venue and feature stars of the day, like Al Jolson and Harpo Marx, who made his stage debut there with his brothers. No concert or show has been held here in decades; but part of it was recently turned into a dance club. The ground level is occupied by several attractions, such as Faber's Fascination arcade, whose incredible 1930s incandescent-bulb sign lights up part of its northern facade.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 3, 2012; July 17, 2013; August 17, 2012.

<sup>158</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 22, 2012; January 10, 2013.

<sup>159</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2012.

<sup>160</sup> Interview with advocate, August 3, 2012.



**Figure 26: Faber's Fascination**

Henderson's Walk, the narrow alley between Henderson's and the adjacent Shore Hotel, used to lead to the Tornado roller coaster, formerly one of Coney Island's great attractions. For several decades, some of the Walk's frontage belonged to Lily Santangelo's World in Wax Musee, a strange wax museum exhibiting reenactments of famous murderers in flagrante delicto (Denson 2002, 187). (Santangelo's voice appears, to her surprise, on the last track of John Lennon's last album [Denson 2002, 226]). With its grand spaces and carnival attractions, the Henderson's building comes off as a very *Coney Island combination of glamour and grit.*<sup>161</sup>

Across Stillwell Avenue from the station is the Shore Theater, a seven-story renaissance-style former Lowes Theater from the 1920s, the tallest and most impressive building still standing on this strip. The theater used to feature movies and live entertainment back in the day. It also had a restaurant at the top. Unfortunately, the Shore has been vacant since the 1970s and its owner, Horace Bullard, has shown little inclination to do anything with it. There have been rumors

<sup>161</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2013.

over the years about interested buyers, including Disney, but nothing has materialized (Denson 2002, 220). *The interiors have long been closed to the public, but recent pictures of it show a majestic and fairly well preserved domed theater. It's sad that it's sitting there unused when it could be a wonderful and much needed venue for performance, movies, or community programs.*<sup>162</sup>



**Figure 27: Shore Theater**

Cater-corner from the station is a Coney Island institution, the original Nathan's Famous, the one-story flagship of the national chain. It stands on the site of Nathan Handwerker's original hotdog stand. Handwerker set up shop there after working at Feltman's, where Charles Feltman invented the "red hot," the uncertain ingredients of which earned it the nicknamed the "hot dog" (Burns 1991). The stand expanded into a restaurant during the 1920s and later on into a chain.

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<sup>162</sup> Interview with advocate, August 2, 2012.

The building itself would be unremarkable if it not for the colorful neon signage that covers its facade and projects from it. These days, there's also a giant billboard over it that counts down the days until the annual Fourth of July hotdog-eating contest, one of the biggest events of the season.<sup>163</sup> *Inside, you can tell that this place has been around for a while. It used to have stainless steel everywhere and old dispensers from the 1940s that were kind of disgusting.*<sup>164</sup> *But it was still a great look. And it's great eating there knowing that it's the original and knowing its role in the history of the hot dog.*<sup>165</sup> *Also, the hot dogs there are far better than at other Nathan's. They have snap and flavor to them that they don't have elsewhere.*<sup>166</sup> *That probably has to do with the drippings that have accumulated in the old grill over the past hundred years.*<sup>167</sup>



**Figure 28: Nathan's Famous**

<sup>163</sup> Interview with advocate, October 17, 2012.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with advocate, May 22, 2013.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

If you look off in the distance past Nathan's you see, set off against the sea and rising far above other structures in the area, a red filigree 250' steel tower known as the Parachute Jump (aka, Brooklyn's Eiffel Tower). It was built as a ride for the 1939 World's Fair and was subsequently moved to Coney Island, where it operated until 1964 (Denson 2002, 67). People would strap into a harness, be hoisted to the top and released into a free fall that lasted for a few petrifying seconds until the parachute opened. As you descended, the ride offered incredible views of the world of color and crowds below.

*The quiet beauty of some of Coney Island's structures stands out against the almost frightening intensity of the amusement area at street level.<sup>168</sup> Along some corridors, particularly along the more crowded alleys, the lights, sounds, and smells can overwhelm you. To a kid, the signage alone—the saturation of crazy typefaces, each with its own personality, some scary and shouting, some whispering—can be both intimidating and alluring. But then above and beyond that, you get the sound of the waves, the breeze, and intricate, monumental structures, colorful and occasionally abandoned, against the blue sky. When I was younger, I would lie on a blanket after a day at the beach and watch the Parachute Jump's empty parachutes float up and down like a jellyfish ballet. And it was as if I had a personal relationship with the ride, as if it was speaking to me and promising something. It was a full feeling. The promise that it was going to become more than it actually was.<sup>169</sup>*

After the ride shut down, the parachutes were left attached to the structure for many years. The tower blackened and its cables dangled in the wind. A little bit

<sup>168</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.



Figure 29: Parachute Jump

further down the Boardwalk, the large, bright Coca Cola clock that you could see from just about anywhere on the beach rusted and lost its hands. *The whole place was like a ghost town—a place that time forgot.*<sup>170</sup> The clock was taken down in the late 1970s, and the Parachute Jump remained in its sorry state for years. But then in 1988, it received a landmark designation, and shortly thereafter, the City restored it back to its original shape (Denson 2002, 252). It also commissioned an LED light display for the structure a couple of years after they built KeySpan Park. *While it's a fine display, it would have been nice if the lights outlined the structure, like the Eiffel Tower lights, rather than move around in circles, which makes it more about the lights and less about the ride.*<sup>171</sup> But what would be even better is if they re-opened the ride.<sup>172</sup> The City says that it can't be done because of insurance and liability reasons.

The Parachute Jump was part of Steeplechase Park, the first and longest lasting of Coney Island's three major turn-of-the-century amusement parks. Steeplechase was the brainchild of George C. Tilyou, a visionary showman who initially modeled his park after the Midway Plaisance of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair (Burns 1991). After visiting the fair, Tilyou tried to buy one of the Midway's most impressive attractions, a 250 foot Ferris Wheel. The deal fell through. Nonetheless, Tilyou advertised upon his return to Coney Island the imminent construction of the largest Ferris Wheel in the world and then proceeded to install to great success one half the size (*ibid.*). The Exposition had shown Tilyou the potential of consolidating attractions into a self-contained area where he could manufacture a festive, zany environment. The round-faced jester with a devilish grin that served as Steeplechase's emblem (a.k.a the Funny Face or Tilly) welcomed people to a 15-

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

<sup>172</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 2, 2013 and November 11, 2013.

acre topsy-turvy world of rides, fun houses, concessions, and dancing pavilions. Steeplechase's amusements encouraged visitors to overcome their inhibitions and surrender to a spirit of recklessness. Many offered couples eagerly sought opportunities to grab hold of each other (*ibid.*). Rides such as the "Barrel of Fun," the "Human Roulette Wheel," the "Whirlpool," and the "Human Pool Table" exposed legs, caused disorientation, and threw bodies into accidental contact with one another. Along similar lines, the park's eponymous ride consisted of a hobbyhorse race in which couples could share a horse and gallop into the night.

Tilyou's formula proved a winning one. Its widespread appeal and the impresario's uncanny ability to overcome adversity helped Steeplechase outlast all other Coney Island amusement parks. In 1907, after a fire destroyed much of Steeplechase, Tilyou posted a sign that read:

To inquiring friends:  
 I have troubles today that I did not have yesterday.  
 I had troubles yesterday that I have not today.  
 On this site will be erected shortly a better, bigger, greater  
 Steeplechase Park.  
 Admission to the burning ruins—10 cents. (Burns 1991)

Upon reopening, Steeplechase included a remarkable new addition, a hangar-like steel and glass pavilion known as the Pavilion of Fun. *This grandiose entrance hall echoed with rides, music, and laughter, smelled of sweat, axle grease, and candy, and shone under the colored light refracted by its tinted glass panes.*<sup>173</sup>

[The] shadowy interior of the Steeplechase pavilion was illuminated by dusty shafts of golden amber light pouring through the glass wall of the pavilion's south side. As the sun traveled west, different attractions were spotlighted for a few blinding moments, before being left in the gloom as the

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<sup>173</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

shafts slowly swept across the wooden floor. The north facade of the building produced an entirely different effect. It was a backlit abstract mosaic of muted colors, oranges and umbers, with backward lettering surrounding cutouts of leaping horses and a silhouetted Steeplechase funny face, all painted to be seen from the street not the interior. It created a bizarre but memorable impression (Denson 2002, 98).



**Figure 30: Postcard of Steeplechase Pavilion**

The Pavilion contained a statuary and about a dozen rides, including some of the most memorable, like the “Blowhole Theater.” People riding the Steeplechase ride exited through this brightly lit stage where, as a laughing audience looked on, their skirts and hats would be blown upwards by compressed air jets hidden in the floor and a midget and a clown would assail them, whacking their behinds with a slapstick and shocking them with a cattle prod (Burns 1991). Upon surviving the ordeal, the patrons would be invited to join the “Laughing Gallery” and laugh at the next set of victims. Like many of Steeplechase’s most popular attractions, the Blowhole Theater made people-watching a centerpiece of the entertainment.

Steeplechase Park continued operations into the 1960s, by which time the character of Coney Island had changed, as had the city’s recreational habits. The

area immediately west of the amusement area—a historically working-class neighborhood with a mix of housing that included everything from bungalows to six-story apartment buildings (Denson 2002, Ch. 7)—was deeply impacted starting in the 1950s by a series of projects that drastically changed its residential population. Master planner and Parks Department Commissioner Robert Moses, who had long harbored plans to eliminate Coney Island amusements and replace them with housing, (*ibid.*, Ch. 5) used federal funds to condemn and acquire land throughout the area and enable large-scale residential development (*ibid.*, 73). Slumlords profited from these efforts by purchasing housing cheaply, letting it deteriorate, and waiting for the City to declare it blighted and purchase it at fair market value (*ibid.*, 155).

By 1960, several longtime neighborhoods had been obliterated to make room for projects such as the middle-income Luna Park Houses and Trump Village (*ibid.*, Ch. 18). Displaced white residents were given the opportunity to obtain housing in the new developments. Displaced minority residents, however, who could seldom afford the new housing, were relocated by the developer, with the City's assistance, to the western side of the island, which had become a "dumping ground" for poor displaced minorities from throughout the City. By the mid-1960s, the neighborhood had been completely transformed. The new ponderous high-rise buildings cast a pall over the atmosphere of levity and carnival that remained. The area's population skyrocketed almost overnight. On the eastern side of the island, some middle-class residents who had willingly moving into that part of the neighborhood discovered that they did not wish to live next to an amusement district and objected to its noise. Meanwhile, the western part was increasingly beleaguered by poverty,

unemployment, racial unrest, and crime—crime that eventually spread to the Boardwalk and to the amusement district, adversely affecting attendance.

Factors beyond neighborhood changes also impacted Steeplechase and other local amusements. The increasing prevalence of air conditioning and television undermined two of the traditional reasons for going down to Coney Island. Higher rates of car ownership made available more distant recreational destinations. And yet, notwithstanding these factors, the amusement area persisted. Rides still operated, and people still came. Steeplechase's ownership, however, had to also contend with management problems of its own. Tilyou's heirs had split into factions, divided over what to do with the park (Denson 2002, 134-135). They could not agree over how or whether to modernize the park's attractions, and they lacked a sense of how to adapt in the face of neighborhood trends. To complicate matters, none had Tilyou's genius for reinvention and promotion. After much deliberation, the family decided to close the park at the end of the 1964 season.

At the closing ceremony, the public address speaker played “There’s No Business Like Show Business” and “Auld Lang Syne” and then the park’s closing bell tolled for each of the 67 years Steeplechase had been in operation (Burns 1991). With each knell, a tier of lights within the pavilion turned off, until, upon the final knell, it went completely dark. Then it blazed one last time, and it went dark for good.

Several interested buyers approached the Tilyous with an interest in putting the park back in operation. The family, however, decided to sell instead to developer Fred Trump for \$2.2 million (Denson 2002, 139). Trump planned to build a

residential and entertainment complex on the site—a plan that required an amendment to the zoning then in place, which only allowed amusement uses. When the City refused to grant the necessary zoning changes, Trump tried to press his case. Hoping to both change the City's mind and, as a bonus, preempt any efforts to landmark the amusement park, he decided to demolish Steeplechase (*ibid.*, 140).

The developer treated the demolition as a celebration. Bikinied models drank champagne in the rain while standing in bulldozer shovels and posing for pictures. He offered guests bricks so that they could throw them through the windows of the Pavilion of Fun. Notwithstanding the demolition and the bikini-clad models, Trump failed to obtain the zoning changes he wanted. Unable to see his plan through, he sold the land to the City in 1969 for \$4 million (*ibid.*, 208).

A few hold-over county fair rides and installations occupied the site from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, despite the City's legal efforts to have them removed (*ibid.*, 207). By the time it did, Kansas Fried Chicken magnet Horace Bullard had developed a plan for the site (*ibid.*, Ch. 21). Bullard, who in the 1970s had proposed building a casino gambling park in Coney Island, wanted to build a \$55 million three-level amusement park that would honor Coney Island's history, incorporating attractions from Luna Park, Dreamland, and Steeplechase Park. In anticipation of the project, which would extend from West 15<sup>th</sup> Street to West 21<sup>th</sup> Street, Bullard had surreptitiously acquired the lots that abutted the Steeplechase site. He then obtained a lease option for the latter.

The detailed model of Bullard's park got everyone excited.<sup>174</sup> As the decade progressed, his plan grew more grandiose, and the project's price tag rose accordingly—first to \$70m and then in quick succession to \$100, \$220, \$250, and \$350m (ibid., Ch. 21). Bullard struggled, however, to secure the necessary financing. The site's close proximity to housing projects scared away investors. In the end, although Bullard kept getting extensions to his option, he could not close on the lease. In 1994, his time ran out. The Giuliani administration terminated his agreement and, within a few years, had chosen the site for his new stadium.

*In the end, the stadium was not such a bad addition to the neighborhood. Cyclones games are a lot of fun, and it is great to have baseball back in Brooklyn.<sup>175</sup> The venue has also attracted more families to Coney—fewer of them had been coming down since the closing of Steeplechase—and that's a good thing.<sup>176</sup> While baseball crowds tend to by-pass the amusement area, the games have garnered a lot of media attention for Coney Island, and that has helped the district as a whole (Denson 2002, 284). On the other hand, the City chose a bad site for the building.<sup>177</sup> The building blocks easy access to the beach and the Boardwalk, it has blank walls on both sides, and it severs the amusement area in half. By splitting the largest continuous, undeveloped stretch of land in the amusement area, it also dashed the possibility of anything like Steeplechase Park ever coming back.*

In the early 1980s, several artists banded together under the name of the Coney Island Hysterical Society (Denson 2002, 226). In addition to doing art installations, they sought to rehabilitate old, non-operational rides that they could themselves fix

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<sup>174</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 11, 2013; July 3, 2013.

<sup>175</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 31, 2012; March 15, 2013.

<sup>176</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with advocate, August 15, 2012.

and to preserve those, like the Parachute Jump, that they could not. Beyond preservation and restoration, one of the group's main aspirations was to bring back the Pavilion of Fun. They painted a large mural a couple of blocks from the Steeplechase site entitled "Steeplechase Come Back" (Denson 2002, 229).



**Figure 31: "Steeplechase Come Back" Mural, Coney Island Hysterical Society**

With it, they hoped to beautify and enliven the area, and to create a beacon for the pavilion's reconstruction. Bullard's plans, which proposed not just its reconstruction, but also the reactivation of the Parachute Jump, gave them the impression that perhaps their strategy had worked.<sup>178</sup> But Bullard's proposal fell through, and the construction of the stadium seemed to shut the door on Steeplechase once and for all. Worse, it also led to the demolition of one of Coney Island's most iconic structures, the Thunderbolt roller coaster.

The Thunderbolt, one of three major historic Coney Island roller coasters, stood just east of the stadium in one of Bullard's lots. This unusual wooden coaster was

<sup>178</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

one of the more commonly photographed and filmed structures in the amusement district (Denson 2002, 248). It overhung the home of the Moran family, which operated the ride from 1925 to 1982. George Moran built the Thunderbolt over his house, the old Kensington Hotel—one of hundreds of similar hotels, bathhouses, and restaurants in Coney during the turn of the century (*ibid.*, 249). Because he drove the coaster's supports through the structure, his furniture rattled and his walls reverberated with the screams of riders whenever the ride was in operation. When George passed away, his son Fred took over the ride. When Fred died, the ride shut down. His long-time girlfriend, Mae Timpano sold her stake in the property to Bullard and vacated the house a few years later (*ibid.*, 215).

During the years that followed, the Thunderbolt and the house fell into disrepair, and nature began to reclaim it. Paint chipped away, beams rusted, and vines crept up its sides. Visible from as far away as the station, the Thunderbolt came to feel like a symbol of *Coney's lost glory*.<sup>179</sup> *Seeing it abandoned and sitting on vacant land year after year was heartbreaking and felt like such a waste.*<sup>180</sup> *Still, the closer you looked, the more imposing it seemed: the massive chrome sign over the entrance; the grace and grandeur of ride's rolling hills and stacked curves. The wild things growing everywhere made the entire structure come alive.*<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Interview with advocate, March 15, 2013.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with advocate, August 21, 2012.

<sup>181</sup> Interviews with advocates, February 11, 2013; August 22, 2012.



**Figure 32: Ruins of the Thunderbolt Roller Coaster**

*Around that time, I had been photographing people, businesses, signs, and rides in the neighborhood, just because everything was disappearing so fast. I went down there one morning to take pictures of the Thunderbolt, which I hadn't yet photographed. But when I got there, it had just been demolished.*

The rubble was just there, the fences were all knocked down, so I walked around among stuff they hadn't carted away yet. And that big Thunderbolt sign, that had had beautiful neon on it, and that spelled the Thunderbolt letters out vertically, they must have, I don't know if vandals did it, but I imagine the guys demolishing it, specifically, intentionally knocked all the letters out of it, so they were all broken. And all the bulbs were shattered, and there was one bulb hanging by a wire thread that wasn't broken. So I took it. It's the only thing I have left.<sup>182</sup>

The blocks west of KeySpan Park's parking lot have been vacant for decades. Bullard, who owns most of them, has shown little inclination of doing anything there since his amusement park plan fell through. Just past them, however, on the Boardwalk, at the very end of the amusement district, you find an unexpected two-story Spanish Revival building from the 1920s known as the Old Childs building after the restaurant that used to be there (Denson 2002, 242).

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<sup>182</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.



**Figure 33: Childs Restaurants Boardwalk Building**

The building's ornate maritime-themed facade, with its varicolored glazed terracotta catches you by surprise after having walked past several blocks of nothingness. It rewards exploration.<sup>183</sup> *Although it too is vacant and run down, the old building still evokes the elegance and magic of early Coney Island.*<sup>184</sup> Efforts to sell it in 2001 triggered a successful campaign to have it landmarked so as to prevent its demolition (Denson 2002, 242).

*Thanks to those efforts, today it stands as a fitting architectural bookend to the amusement district.*<sup>185</sup>



**Figure 34: Detail, Childs Restaurant Boardwalk Building**

<sup>183</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>184</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 6, 2012; December 12, 2012.

<sup>185</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2013.

From Childs, you can walk back to the main amusement area on the Boardwalk.

The Riegelmann Boardwalk, built in the 1920s, is *one of the great public spaces in New York City,<sup>186</sup> an unsurpassed venue for people-watching. Sitting on a boardwalk bench and watching people go by is like going to a show.<sup>187</sup> You see all kinds: young, old, white, black, dressed, undressed, sane, crazy.<sup>188</sup>*



**Figure 35: Coney Island's Riegelmann Boardwalk**

*The public access to the Boardwalk makes possible one of Coney Island's great virtues—the fact that you can have a good time there by spending as much or as little as you want.<sup>189</sup> Historically, the amusement area has always been like that,<sup>190</sup> a democratic place where anyone can enjoy the view, the beach, and the spectacle without spending a dime.<sup>191</sup> On the Boardwalk, you regularly come across performances, concerts, and dance parties.<sup>192</sup> If you're lucky, you can catch a concert by the Hungry March Band, an eclectic, anarchic, and resolutely non-martial*

<sup>186</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>187</sup> Interview with advocate, August 10, 2012.

<sup>188</sup> Interview with advocate, August 10, 2012; January 10, 2013; July 31, 2012.

<sup>189</sup> Interview with advocate, May 22, 2013.

<sup>190</sup> Interview with advocate, July 17, 2013.

<sup>191</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>192</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2012.

*ensemble that manages to turn its performances into participatory, riotous Dionysian affairs.<sup>193</sup>*

*A walk down the Boardwalk is an atmospheric experience that can range from relaxing to exhilarating depending on the time of day. In the morning, it's very peaceful. You only see a few strollers and hear little beyond the sound of the waves. A few hours later, especially during high season, a joyful mayhem descends on it. And then at night, you get a more sedate crowd illuminated by neon lights and occasionally by the fireworks displays, which on a humid night seem to hang in the air forever.<sup>194</sup> Boardwalk strolls can also hold in store a surprise or two.<sup>195</sup>*

*On the Fourth of July years ago, a fellow who operated a local bar brought in a truckload of fireworks from the Macy's annual show to put on a display once businesses had closed for the night. There were about ten kids on the beach lighting these things off... giant chrysanthemums, the kind that might explode over the harbor; except that these were exploding about 50 feet off the ground. And if you were on the beach, you were dodging this stuff.<sup>196</sup> It was insane, like something out of *Apocalypse Now*. You couldn't get away with that anywhere else.<sup>197</sup>*

The Boardwalk serves as a crossing or porous border between the amusement area and the beach. That porosity helps give each side a bit of the character of the other—a defining quality of Coney Island.<sup>198</sup> The beach—the saltwater smell, the unobstructed skies, and the lulling sounds—can occasionally offer relief from the

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<sup>193</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>194</sup> Interview with advocates, August 6, 2012; August 3, 2012.

<sup>195</sup> Interview with advocate, August 7, 2012.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2013.

<sup>197</sup> Interview with advocate, August 17, 2012.

<sup>198</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2013.

carnivalesque intensity of the amusements.<sup>199</sup> But it can often also feel like a circus itself,<sup>200</sup> which makes it a fun spectacle even if you don't like the beach.<sup>201</sup>



**Figure 36: Coney Island Beach**

Being accessible by subway and a stone's throw away from the amusements, the beach attracts all kinds of characters. *You can expect to encounter people from all walks of life<sup>202</sup> and with little effort even meet a few.<sup>203</sup> I was once talking to a friend at a bar by the Boardwalk, and she says to me “why don't you come down and join us at the beach; you probably know half the people there”. After a while, I decided, why not.*

And when I went down there I didn't know any of them besides her, not one person, but the thing that absolutely blew my mind was the diversity of the people, from [John] to Hector to Lou, to... there was this guy called Barracuda with his Hungarian girls. I mean, you had black, oriental, white, Italian, I mean I'm Irish, [John] was Italian. You had Barracuda; I don't know what he was, but he had these women who barely spoke English, if any, and they were Hungarian. You just had such a

<sup>199</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

<sup>200</sup> Interview with advocate, August 8, 2012.

<sup>201</sup> Interview with advocate, February 15, 2013.

<sup>202</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with advocate, September 6, 2012.

hodgepodge—and Hector was Puerto Rican. It was just like, I'm like looking at this group of people hanging out here and I really had a really good time. One of the things that I think is absolutely fantastic about Coney Island is the diversity of the people that go there. And, everybody goes to Coney Island to have a good time and it doesn't matter what race, color, religion, whatever; you're going to Coney Island to forget your job, to forget your problems, to just go out and have a good time.<sup>204</sup>

The inland side of the Boardwalk was once lined with an uninterrupted row of arcades, bathhouses, and vendors, some of which used to remain open most of the year. Old pictures show people in rolling chairs under blankets in the middle of winter being carted up and down the Boardwalk. These days, the only remaining businesses are those abutting the remaining active amusement area, from West 15<sup>th</sup> St. to West 10<sup>th</sup> St. Most sell souvenirs, beach apparel, or seaside carnival food: fried seafood, funnel cakes, hotdogs, and the like. But there are also a few amusements and barkers along the way. Barkers—the folks who stand outside carnival attractions trying to lure potential customers—have been a Coney Island fixture for years. *Their ballyies can rise to the level of performance.*<sup>205</sup> *The back and forth between barkers and passersby offers free boardwalk entertainment that, if they target you, can come at your expense.*<sup>206</sup>

The first barker you encounter coming from the west side is the one calling out, “Shoot the freak in the freaking head!” The freak in question is the protagonist of “Shoot the Freak,” a game in which you get to shoot at a costumed human target (i.e., the freak) with paint bullets as he taunts you. Some find this in bad taste.<sup>207</sup> *But its strangeness makes it fit right in. It feels like your typical historic Coney Island*

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<sup>204</sup> Interview with advocate June 5, 2014.

<sup>205</sup> Interview with advocate, May 22, 2013.

<sup>206</sup> Interview with advocate, August 2, 2012.

<sup>207</sup> Interview with advocate, April 9, 2013.

*attraction, even though it has only been in operation for a few years.<sup>208</sup> It's not easy to shoot the freak. He's elusive. He has hiding places. I once, however, went there with a friend who was an Israeli army veteran and an excellent markswoman. She shot him three times in the freaking head.*<sup>209</sup>

A few doors down from “Shoot the Freak” is Ruby’s Bar and Grill, a bar run by the family of the late Ruby Jacobs, who acquired the business during the 1970s. The place has operated continuously as a bar since the 1930s and has *the vibe of a historic, ocean-side neighborhood bar that has been there forever.*<sup>210</sup> *Its old-fashioned wooden bar, hand-painted and neon signs, and layers of artifacts and pictures of old Coney Island all give it an authentic, old Brooklyn feel.*<sup>211</sup> So do its patrons, an unusually friendly and eclectic group that seems to welcome and chat up whomever wanders in.<sup>212</sup> Some of the patrons and certainly the bartenders and owners have been Coney Island regulars for years and need little prompting to regale you with stories about old Coney Island. A few of them are themselves part of that history.<sup>213</sup> *If you sat there for a couple of hours, you'd get a pretty good sense of what Coney Island is all about:*<sup>214</sup> *the view of the beach and of the crowds on the Boardwalk* (which Ruby used to call the best item on the menu (Denson 2002, 255), *the smell of saltwater, the hustle and bustle, and the sense that something unexpected that will happen, because something always does.*<sup>215</sup>

Next to Ruby’s is a small, boxy, pink store—Lola Staar’s Souvenir Boutique, the brainchild of Dianna Carlin, an artist from Detroit. Carlin’s first Coney Island visit,

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<sup>208</sup> Interview with advocate, June 5, 2013.

<sup>209</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>210</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 13, 2012; August 17, 2012.

<sup>211</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 15, 2013; August 22, 2012; August 2, 2012.

<sup>212</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 17, 2012; August 22, 2012; March 15, 2013; January 10, 2013.

<sup>213</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

<sup>214</sup> Interviews with advocates, January 10, 2013; July 31, 2012; September 7, 2012.

<sup>215</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

in 1998, inspired a line of Coney-themed t-shirt designs that she wholesaled to a few stores throughout New York City. While her designs enjoyed some success, earning her the Sportswear International award for best t-shirt designer in 1999 and 2000, she dreamed of opening a store where she could express her vision of the neighborhood more fully. When a Boardwalk storefront became available in 2001, she seized the opportunity.

Unlike other souvenir stores in the area, which sell mainly bargain t-shirts, inflatable toys, and bottled water, Carlin sells Coney-related post-cards, books, collectibles, and higher-end casual clothing. Much of the merchandise she designs herself. The boutique did well from the outset, particularly among out-of-town and middle-income visitors. It did, however, get a rough reception during its first years from local residents and workers in the area: for a time, a barker from the neighboring arcade took to shouting racist slurs through his microphone at her white customers whenever his business was slow; someone once glued her padlock; and some customers have reacted violently to her prices. Nonetheless, Carlin persevered and has gradually managed to become part of the Boardwalk and of the Coney Island landscape.

From a little bit further down the Boardwalk you get a good view of the Wonder Wheel, the 1920s landmarked Ferris Wheel that anchors and lends its name to the Vourderis family's amusement park. *The Vourderises, who acquired the Wonder Wheel in the 1980s, have done a great job of maintaining the ride and its original signage. Every off-season, you see them taking the ride apart and repainting it.<sup>216</sup> The structure looks amazing.<sup>217</sup>*

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<sup>216</sup> Interview with advocate, May 15, 2013.

<sup>217</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

*Looks aside, it is a breathtaking ride. From within the mechanical structure, you get unparalleled views of the ocean and of the rest of Coney Island.<sup>218</sup> Off in the distance, you can even catch a glimpse of the city.<sup>219</sup> It is also unusual in that, unlike other Ferris Wheels, some of its carts swing back and forth between an inner and outer circumference of the wheel, adding an exciting (and if you're not expecting it, terrifying) jolt to the ride.<sup>220</sup> It's one of the best and most unique rides left in Coney Island.*



**Figure 37: Wonder Wheel**

The area behind and past the Wonder Wheel has been the heart of the amusement area and Coney Island's center of gravity since the closing of Steeplechase. This is where you can get the best sense of how Coney's many charms complement each other: *the energy, colors, and sounds of the rides, the proximity to the beach, the view, the salt air, and the historic quality of it all.*<sup>221</sup> You don't have to get on a single ride to get a kick out of *the spectacle that surrounds you.*<sup>222</sup>

<sup>218</sup> Interview with advocate, July 17, 2013.

<sup>219</sup> Interview with advocate, March 15, 2013.

<sup>220</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 22, 2012; July 11, 2013.

<sup>221</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>222</sup> Interview with advocate, February 15, 2013.

Coney Island's main amusement park is Astroland, a space-age themed park opened by Dewey Albert in 1963 and operated by his family ever since. It features two dozen or so rides, the most notable of which might be the Astrotower (aka "the bagel in the sky" [Denson 2002, 141]), a 270 foot beam with a round, rotating, enclosed glass compartment that carries people to the top and offers them a wonderful 360° panoramic view. *Whenever gusts hit the tower on a windy day, they produce an eerie whistle that travels throughout the area and commands attention even when the ride is not in operation.*<sup>223</sup>

For some, Astroland will always pale in comparison to Steeplechase, which closed just one year after Astroland first opened its gates. It is about half the size and *not nearly as spectacular.*<sup>224</sup> *Too many of its rides have felt like temporary, outdated county fair attractions that lack the uniqueness, grandeur, and refinement of rides at Steeplechase.*<sup>225</sup> Still, Astroland kept Coney Island amusements going during difficult decades (Denson 2002, 141) and the Alberts made their formula work,<sup>226</sup> complementing their rides with programming, like cabaret shows, circus performances, and fireworks displays (co-sponsored by Deno's Wonder Wheel). That, and the familiar presence of the Albert family and its staff, has endeared the park to many.<sup>227</sup>

*Over time, Astroland's appeal has become more aesthetic and less dependent on the quality of its attractions.*<sup>228</sup> *In the case of some rides, it always was. One of the worst rides, Dante's Inferno,*

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<sup>223</sup> Interview with advocate, February 8, 2013.

<sup>224</sup> Interviews with advocates, January 10, 2013; June 5, 2013.

<sup>225</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 3, 2013; January 10, 2013.

<sup>226</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

<sup>227</sup> Interviews with advocates, September 7, 2012; January 10, 2013; February 8, 2013; February 15, 2013.

<sup>228</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 22, 2012; February 15, 2013.

*always looked great, with a giant demon, a caped mannequin, and hydras projecting from its facade.<sup>229</sup> With the passage of time, the park's mid-century space-age futurism has also acquired a sort of old-fashioned charm and kitsch appeal.<sup>230</sup> Features like the starry sign over the main entrance and the large rocket fronting the Boardwalk now seem downright iconic and indelibly associated with Coney Island.<sup>231</sup>*



Figure 38: Astroland Rocket

Despite their quirky charm, when it comes to Coney Island icons, none of Astroland's rides matches the Cyclone, across the street from the park, but under the same management. The Cyclone, the last wooden roller coaster left in Coney Island, has an international reputation among coaster enthusiasts of being one of the best rides in the world.<sup>232</sup> It was built in the 1920s in an unusually narrow lot, which gave it its unique design and violently sharp turns.<sup>233</sup> A quick look at riders' necks as they whip on that first turn alerts you to the ride's chiropractic possibilities. *I've never ridden the Cyclone myself;<sup>234</sup> and I don't intend to. But it's an amazing*

<sup>229</sup> Interviews with advocates, February 15, 2013; August 22, 2012.

<sup>230</sup> Interview with advocate, September 7, 2012.

<sup>231</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 17, 2013; August 17, 2012.

<sup>232</sup> Interview with advocate, March 15, 2013.

<sup>233</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>234</sup> Interview with advocate, August 2, 2012.

*ride to witness: the noise and the shaking;<sup>255</sup> its charge and intensity.<sup>256</sup> It's the sort of old-school roller coaster that would never be built today,<sup>257</sup> and it's also some of the last great architecture left in Coney Island.<sup>258</sup>*



**Figure 39: Cyclone Roller Coaster**

The Cyclone almost did not make it out of the 1970s. The New York Aquarium, which occupies the land just past the Cyclone, felt the ride stood in the way of its expansion plans and, more generally, that amusement rides undermined the cultural climate it wanted to cultivate in the area (Denson 2002, 147). The institution lobbied the City, which owned the Cyclone's lot, to give it control over the site. Astroland, knowing that the Aquarium had no intention of operating the ride, feared that the abandoned structure would hurt business and also favored its demolition. Those plans received support as well from the board of the Luna Park Houses across the street. Some of the buildings' residents apparently objected to the ride's noise (Denson, 2002, 247).

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013

<sup>257</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 2, 2012; August 3, 2012

<sup>258</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013

Fortunately, the Aquarium's plan fell through. The City requested bids for the operation of the ride and ended up granting the rights to a team led by Dewey Albert, who restored the ride and incorporated it into Astroland. Some years later, during the 1980s, the Cyclone received a New York City landmark designation.

*This is one of the few remaining rides that allow you to almost touch what Coney Island must have been like during its heyday.<sup>239</sup> So much has been lost; but here and there you find a piece that is still hanging on.<sup>240</sup>*

The Cyclone marks the end of the active amusement area. Dreamland, the last of the three great turn-of-the-century amusement parks used to be just east of it, as did before that the Iron Tower, an observation tower—at the time the tallest structure in the United States—which was brought to Coney Island from the 1876 Philadelphia Exposition (Burns 1991).

Dreamland opened a year after Luna Park and tried to emulate its successful formula at a grander scale. Luna Park was lit by 250,000 lights; Dreamland by 1,000,000. Dreamland's Beacon Tower, modeled on the Giralda in Seville, exceeded Luna Park's in size and brightness. Many of its rides—Shoot-the-Chutes and the Canals of Venice—dwarfed their Luna Park counterparts. Its disaster spectacles did not fall far behind. They included a flooded Galveston, an erupting Mount Vesuvius, and a Boer War battle re-enacted by six hundred veterans who had just returned from the real thing (Burns 1991). Some attractions were even purchased directly from Luna Park, like Dr. Martin Couney's Infant Incubator, an

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<sup>239</sup> Interviews with advocates, December 12, 2012; May 22, 2013.

<sup>240</sup> Interview with advocate, May 22, 2013.

exhibition of the care of premature babies and the first such facility in the country (Burns 1991).

Also like Luna Park, Dreamland tried to bring a taste of the exotic to Coney Island. The park's human exhibits included an entire Eskimo village, a dozen Somali tribesmen from French Equatorial Africa, and fifty-one Philippine warriors (Burns 1991). The grandest of these may have been Liliputia, a half-scale recreation of 15<sup>th</sup> Century Nuremberg inhabited by 500 dwarfs, some of whom were firemen (and responded to alarms in the disaster exhibits), Chinese laundrymen, policemen, and wagon drivers.

If anything differentiated Dreamland from its competitors it was its cultural aspiration. Its owners wanted to offer a more refined form of entertainment. Its elegant all-white architecture and Victorian quality distinguished it from Luna Park's psychedelia. Some of its attractions had a religious thrust, like *Creation*, a dazzling depiction of the Divine Origin, and its apocalyptic counterpart, *The End of the World*. Perhaps because of its cultural pretense, Dreamland never enjoyed Luna Park's success. Dreamland's management tried to change the park's image, but ran out of time (Denson 2002, 38). In 1911, a last-minute repair to *Hell Gate* sparked a fire. The combustible materials found in all the park's structures helped the fire spread. In less than two hours, the flames, which could be seen from Manhattan, had consumed all of Dreamland (Burns 1991).

Most of Dreamland's old site is currently occupied by the New York Aquarium, which was moved there from its old Battery Park location in Lower Manhattan by

Robert Moses as part of his effort to displace Coney Island's amusements and replace them with more edifying attractions (Denson 2002, 73). By design, the Aquarium is walled off from both the Boardwalk and the amusement rides, providing a physical border to the district.

Off the Boardwalk, the amusement area is broken up into sections by a grid of city streets that can be as exciting as the amusement parks themselves. The most notable among these are narrow alleys: Jones Walk and Henderson's Walk, which run perpendicular to Surf Avenue, and the Bowery, which runs east-west from Astroland to the Steeplechase site. Historically, these corridors featured all manner of attractions: rides, food vendors, tattoo parlors, cigar shops, and carnival games like Skee-ball, test-your-strength High Strikers, shooting galleries, and penny arcades (Denson 2002, 261). Today, there are fewer of these than during Coney's heyday. Some of the alleys have also shrunk. The Bowery lost just about all the structures that used to lead from Stillwell Avenue to Steeplechase's side entrance.

*Nonetheless, in their variety and intensity, these corridors still offer a quintessential Coney Island experience. Stalls cram against one another, each with its own personality.<sup>241</sup> Barkers call out to whomever passes their way. And on a good day, there are people everywhere, some playing, and some watching.<sup>242</sup> It's a carnival of sounds, colors, and smells that feels like Coney of old.<sup>243</sup>*

The types of attractions found along the amusement area's side streets flourished in Coney Island during the 1930s Great Depression. Coney Island became, if anything, more popular during those years. But the difficult economic climate

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<sup>241</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 13, 2012; October 17, 2012.

<sup>242</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>243</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

changed the tenor of its attractions. Sit-down restaurants fell out of favor as crowds gravitated toward “grab joints” like Nathan’s. Elaborate expensive rides gave way to cheap spectacles like freak shows. Before, elephants went down water-slides, now pigs did. Cockroach races became a thing (Burns 1991). Because so much in the neighborhood—from the subway fare to the hotdog—cost a nickel or perhaps because of the preponderance of cheap thrills, Coney Island earned during this time a new moniker: the Nickel Empire (Denson 2002, 65).

The Nickel Empire aesthetics and typical attractions have persisted over the years. Nothing arose to entirely supplant them. Their persistence, however, can also be attributed to subsequent generations of impresarios, artists, and operators who kept Nickel Empire-style attractions alive and even reinvigorated them. The most prominent champion of this tradition has been CI USA, an arts organization in the heart of the amusement area organized around the mission of “defend[ing] the honor of America’s popular culture.”<sup>244</sup>

Coney Island has long exerted a fascination on artists. During the first half of the twentieth century, it attracted the likes of Joseph Stella, Weegee, and Maxim Gorky. By the 1970s and 80s, however, the neighborhood inspired artistic attention primarily because of its urban decay (Denson 2002, 223). That began to change in the early 1980s with the arrival of a small group of young artists. Some of them banded together as the Coney Island Hysterical Society (CIHS), the group responsible for the “Steeplechase Come Back” mural. CIHS members Richard Eagan and Philomena Moreno used to frequent Coney Island as children in the

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<sup>244</sup> CI USA website: <http://www.coneyisland.com/>

1950s and had come back decades later while working on separate Coney-inspired art projects. They met as participants in an art exhibit, bonded over Coney Island's sorry state, and decided to form an organization to help preserve and restore local attractions. They painted murals, repaired rides, and even ran one—the Spookhouse, an artsy take on a dark ride (Denson 2002, 226-228).

Early on, Eagan and Moreno met Dick Zigun, a theater MFA from Bridgeport, Connecticut who had arrived in Coney Island drawn by its theatrical traditions and eccentric characters. One of those characters was the proprietor of the World in Wax Musee, Lillie Santangelo, whom Zigun described as Grandma Moses on LSD (Denson 2002, 225). Stantangelo appealed to Zigun for help. A truck had run into her storefront and damaged some of her exhibits. She needed to repair them before the start of the Halloween season. Zigun agreed to lend a hand. The resulting exhibit was a success and became the first installment in what would become a yearly Halloween tradition for Zigun's future organization, CI USA.

Zigun and Eagan collaborated on numerous initiatives that drew media attention and public notice. Decked out in early 20th Century outfits, they staged publicity stunts and produced events like antique bathing suit contests and the city's first break-dance festival. Their collaborations, however, came to an end in 1987, when several setbacks forced CIHS to withdraw from the scene. This left CI USA as the sole arts organization in Coney Island. By then, the group had become an established presence, securing a venue on the Boardwalk and running a performance series—plays, concerts, and poetry slams—even during winter months.

Zigun adapted his program through trial and error according to the taste of local crowds (performance art, no; drag queens, yes), while still retaining a few “audience-development” projects. His approach gradually paid off, turning CI USA into a significant engine of events, attractions, and publicity. Over the years, the group has organized hundreds of events, including film festivals, concerts, lecture series, tattoo and motorcycle festivals, sideshow classes, and walking tours. More recently, it also opened a year-round museum exhibiting a collection of amusement artifacts from Coney Island’s history. But perhaps CI USA’s most noteworthy attractions have been “Sideshow by the Seashore,” its burlesque revues, and the Mermaid Parade.

“Sideshow by the Seashore” is a traditional ten-in-one circus sideshow (ten acts and a bonus one) featuring sword-swallowers, glass walkers, rubber girls, snake charmers, and an assorted variety of freaks. *Although this type of show has historical roots in Coney Island, it had long disappeared from the neighborhood and from most of the country until its revival by CI USA.<sup>245</sup> Even today, it’s a fairly unique spectacle and not the sort of thing one would expect to find in a contemporary amusement area.<sup>246</sup> You go down for a day at the beach, and you come across these lush, colorful banners advertising exotic acts, like the Electric Lady. A barker lures you in and next thing you know you’re watching a guy hammer a nail into his face. It’s unexpected and feels like something from a different era.<sup>247</sup>*

The general aesthetic of the production borrows from the visual vocabulary of early twentieth century carnival folk art. The performances themselves, however, appeal

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<sup>245</sup> Interview with advocate, May 15, 2013.

<sup>246</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

<sup>247</sup> Interviews with advocates, October 17, 2012; July 31, 2012.

to contemporary sensibilities. They also involve a good amount of audience interaction. *During one of my visits, there was some sort of staff dispute, and the freaks did not want to perform. There was, however, a teenage kid there who must have helped out with the show, because he knew the entire show well enough to perform most of it on his own. But he still needed audience members to play certain roles. He picked me to sit on an electric chair and wanted to light a torch on fire with my tongue, which he had doused in butane or something. I didn't want to do it; but it was a pretty bloodthirsty crowd. So, after trying with little luck to get out of it, I did. That was a pretty neat day.*<sup>248</sup>

“Burlesque at the Beach” might be best described as post-modern girlie revue—erotic spectacles in which performers subvert the genre’s conventions. Some have dubbed the style “neo-burlesque.” *The shows are strip-shows; but the stripping is in service of the shtick or artistic premise of the acts.*<sup>249</sup> *They’re almost always light-hearted and, at their best, funny.* Since the genre’s early days at CI USA, neo-burlesque has grown in popularity, becoming by the late 90s a full-fledged burlesque revival and a nightlife fixture in New York City and beyond. Several major acts, however, still regard CI USA as their home, perform regularly at its events, and have helped maintain there a bit of a burlesque scene.<sup>250</sup>

Finally, there is the popular Mermaid Parade, CI USA’s largest single event. Founded in 1983, this campy reinterpretation of Coney’s 1950s Mardi Gras parades takes place on the first Saturday after the summer solstice. The parade features floats, banners, marching bands, and hundreds of costumed mermaids and mermen who share a general affinity for exhibitionism and colorful extravagance

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<sup>248</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>249</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 2, 2012; June 5, 2012.

<sup>250</sup> Interview with advocate, September 6, 2012.

(Denson 2002, 229). In Zigun's words, "It's not the result of an ethnic or religious tradition. It's not commercial or promoting anything like the Macy's Thanksgiving parade. It's a parade for half-naked artists in New York to strut their stuff. We want drag queens dressed as tuna cans" (Zimmer 2006). Past parades have included Geisha Mermaids, Mermedusas, Day of the Dead mermaids, King Neptunes, and countless variations of G-strings, parasols, bustiers, and glittery accessories. At the event's conclusion, the best costumes receive awards.



**Figure 40: Mermaid at Mermaid Parade 2014**

During the event's early years, participants outnumbered spectators. It has since become the largest arts parade in the country, attracting well over 750,000 people, including many who have never before visited Coney Island. For some, the Mermaid Parade has been both the introduction to Coney Island and the hook that has turned them into regular visitors.<sup>251</sup> The event itself invites repeat spectatorship

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<sup>251</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 8, 2012; September 6, 2012; September 7, 2012; July 17, 2013; May 15, 2013.

and participation. Each year comes with new surprises—a new round of zany costumes and wild dances and routines<sup>252</sup>—and offers a new opportunity for creative self-expression.<sup>253</sup> That participatory, democratic quality is one of the events main appeals. From the outset, Zigun envisioned the parade as a hometown celebration that anyone could join by merely making a costume, joining the march, and putting on a show.<sup>254</sup> *This makes it feels at once old-fashioned and magical, like an extraordinary small town parade, where everything is both homemade and bizarre.*<sup>255</sup> *I remember a local artist whose preferred medium was paper plates once making an entire float out of them.*<sup>256</sup>

The first time I saw the mermaid parade, it was completely by surprise. I had never heard of the Mermaid Parade in my life. I just walked out of West 5<sup>th</sup> Street and made a right on Surf Avenue and all of the sudden there were these cars there that were coming off the parade—that's where the motorized floats come down Surf Avenue. And it completely surprised me. I said, what's going on here. [Now] every year I go. It's the highlight of my year.<sup>257</sup>

### C. SCI's Image of Coney Island

Members of SCI uniformly regarded Coney Island as an iconic place—a place widely associated with a set of images that render it unique. A place would hardly qualify as iconic if there were a hundred just like it. And for the advocates, Coney Island stands apart from anywhere else.

**Author:** Are there other places like Coney in NY?

**Interviewee:** No! *Nooo!* Make sure you get that on tape. No!<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Interview with advocate, August 8, 2012; June 5, 2013.

<sup>253</sup> Interview with advocate, December 8, 2013; February 1, 2013.

<sup>254</sup> Interview with advocate, August 17, 2012.

<sup>255</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

<sup>256</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

<sup>257</sup> Interview with advocate, May 15, 2013.

<sup>258</sup> Interview with advocate, April 9, 2013.

Because of the perceived ubiquity of Coney's reputation, advocates felt the neighborhood's iconicity requires little explanation. Everyone knows about Coney Island. What "everyone knows," however, consisted of specific historic representations that have helped define the neighborhood. These images and stories cast Coney Island as a very particular beachside amusement area that has played an outsized role in the history of collective recreation.

SCI accounts of historic Coney Island called attention the size of its parks, and to the extravagance, originality, and cultural influence of its attractions. They evoked an innovative and larger-than-life amusement destination that captured the world's imagination.

When you look at the history of Coney Island, there were so many firsts there, and so many strange things, like incubator babies and these weird burlesque shows and the hotdog and the freak shows.<sup>259</sup>

Most references to Coney Island's epic qualities centered on the three turn-of-the-century parks and especially on the fanciful, otherworldly design of their grounds and of their rides.

[The Steeplechase Park Pavilion] was gorgeous. You know, it's lit up at night. It's magical.<sup>260</sup>

Coney Island is about fantasy architecture. Las Vegas stole that from us.<sup>261</sup>

The centrality of Coney Island's aesthetic profile to representations of the neighborhood's early years had, by association, valorized vestiges from that period,

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<sup>259</sup> Interview with advocate, September 7, 2012.

<sup>260</sup> Interview with advocate, July 1, 2013.

<sup>261</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2013.

ennobling typical design features and even less distinguished structures. Advocates called attention not only to famous vintage attractions like the Cyclone, the Wonder Wheel, and the Parachute Jump, but also to unremarkable arcade stalls and dilapidated buildings, like the Bank of Coney Island building, whose connection to the early amusement area is primarily one of contemporaneity and proximity.

For members of SCI, the image of iconic Coney Island connoted more than the grandeur of the amusement area's Golden Age. It also evoked the intensity that characterized the district during its popular mid-century years. Representations of the from this period commonly feature dense agglomerations of crowds, lights, and attractions—images echoed by advocates in their descriptions of historic Coney Island.

[It was] an amazing beach and great amusements and sideshows everywhere. It was this carnival. Back then there was much more of a carnival atmosphere. It was this overwhelming sense everywhere you went down here back then. There was just music everywhere, rides moving, and lights, and smells of like cotton candy and candy apples and hot dogs and sausage, people selling things out of baskets in the beach... and it didn't close.<sup>262</sup>

In describing Coney Island's distinctiveness, the advocates emphasized carnivalesque imagery and the honky-tonk elements of the amusement landscape: Nathan's hand-painted and neon signs; alleys dense with arcade stalls; and carnival barkers. They also highlighted the longstanding relation between the neighborhood and its diverse crowds.

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<sup>262</sup> Interview with advocate, May 22, 2013.

Coney Island's reputation for inclusiveness has been promoted by famous images of the neighborhood and enshrined in several of the area's historic monikers, like the Poor Man's Riviera or the Paradise of the Proletariat. Advocates explained that Coney Island has always attracted all kinds of people because anyone can get there for the price of a subway fare and have a good time, spending as much or as little as they like. Images of diverse multitudes frolicking on the beach, the Boardwalk, and the amusement grounds have been among the most common historic representations of the neighborhood. Advocates often mentioned, for instance, the heterogeneous crowds that burst out of the frame of Weegee's mid-century pictures, as well as attractions that celebrated crowds and put visitors on display as part of the spectacle. They conceded that old images make it easy to idealize the inclusiveness of a neighborhood that was not even fully integrated during the mid-century (Denson 2002, 135). Nonetheless, members of SCI felt that, certainly in relative terms, a tradition of inclusion did exist in Coney Island and that it still persists.

The famous Weegee photo of the people on the Coney Island beach.... You see shoulder to shoulder all these different races and ethnicities that might have conflict or tension in the city, shoulder to shoulder.... Every single person in that picture that you can see is smiling. And just seeing how it dissolves racial tensions....<sup>263</sup>

Interviewee: One of the things historically to me that makes Coney Island awesome was that sort of erase of class for a day. It didn't matter whether you were the lady of the house or you were the maid of the house and we were all for this one day with this little tiny piece, you were all equal and dancing on the beach, and what happened in Coney Island stayed in Coney Island. Then you put on your clothes.

Author: Do you think that equalizing effect is still here?

Interviewee: Not as much. You know, I still think that the no judgment is still here.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Interview with advocate, July 17, 2013.

<sup>264</sup> Interview with advocate, May 12, 2013.

Advocates linked the Coney Island's reputation for inclusivity to the image of the neighborhood as a world apart—an alternative world that allows not only uncommon social mixing but also other sorts of unconventional behavior.

It's always been a wild kind of place. And also a place that, even though it feels like some things are really expensive, anyone can go there for the price of the subway ride. It has all kinds of people going there.<sup>265</sup>

For members of SCI, the notions of inclusivity and unconventionality reinforced each other. On the one hand, the diversity and visibility of visitors increased the likelihood of coming across unusual characters and eccentric behavior. On the other, Coney Island's distance and the topsy-turvy nature of local attractions promoted a reputation for the extraordinary and the unconventional. As a result, they had come to associate the neighborhood both with a blurring of class and racial differences and with challenges to norms of propriety. This association shaped the advocates' depictions of the Boardwalk, the beach, and the amusement area.

In the advocates' accounts, the connection between Coney Island and the relaxation of conventional boundaries pertained to more than just behavior. It also applied to the juxtaposition of incongruous components of the neighborhood's landscape. This juxtaposition lay at the heart of some of the Coney Island images that most resonated with members of SCI—images depicting stark contrasts and porous borders between: city and nature; density and openness; indoor and outdoor; present and past; frenzy and repose. For advocates, the interaction

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<sup>265</sup> Interview with advocate, August 17, 2012.

between these polarities defined as much as anything the essence of Coney Island and of its most representative attractions.

Author: [If] you want someone to understand Coney Island, where would you tell them to go?

Interviewee: I would say, I guess, you have a couple of hours? Come, we'll go and sit at the bar at Ruby's and talk for a while.

Author: Why?

Interviewee: Well, they have all those photographs, for one. And yes, they do have regulars and they've still got old-timers. You're on the boardwalk, you can see the ocean, you can smell the salt water. And you've got the hustle and bustle of people being in Coney Island in an essential way.

Author: What does that mean?

Interviewee: It means you can't be anywhere else like that... just being at a place that is soaked in its own history. I'm looking for a place that has some sand on the floor, that has an indoor-outdoor feel to it. That combination. You can see the Parachute Jump down the boardwalk. You can hear what's going on, the cars on the Cyclone. I would send them to Feldman's, I would send them to Steeplechase, but I can't.<sup>266</sup>

Author: What embodies, of the stuff [that still remains in the neighborhood, Coney Island's history]?

Interviewee: Public access to the boardwalk – the view. The view, the fact that anyone coming on the train sees that. They see the rides, they see the skies, they see the ocean. There's no barrier; there's no caste division; it is for everyone. If you're rich, enjoy it, if you're middle class, enjoy it, if you're poor, enjoy it, if you're homeless, enjoy it. Just go to have a good time, don't do anything, you know, to disturb anybody else and it's literally for everyone.<sup>267</sup>

In sum, members of SCI could not reduce the quintessential Coney Island image to a single dimension. Their representations captured several qualities of the place as well as an interaction among them. In them, Coney Island was an amusement area distinguished and rendered iconic by its history, location, and visitors. It was a historic, beachside, urban place for recreation frequented by people of all sorts, some of whom tend to act a little crazy.

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<sup>266</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

<sup>267</sup> Interview with advocate, July 17, 2013.

## D. The Experience of Coney Island

Advocate accounts of the neighborhood, as we have seen, conveyed a particular image of iconic Coney Island. When asked to explain the neighborhood to a hypothetical first-time visitor, however, members of SCI maintained that Coney Island required no explanation—that its unique attributes were self-evident.

Author: If you wanted someone to understand Coney Island...what stories would you tell them?

Interviewee: I really wouldn't tell them anything, I'd just have them look around, I don't think that I'd tell them any stories. I think it's self-explanatory.<sup>268</sup>

Author: If someone asks you where they should go to truly experience Coney Island, where would you send them?

Interviewee: Just seeing the physical landscape of the place, the rides, even if the rides weren't running, and the boardwalk, and the beach—it's getting a feeling for the place. I wouldn't have been telling them that you have to go out there in order to get this out of it, per se. I would just say you have to go out there because there's only one Coney Island.<sup>269</sup>

However self-evident the neighborhood's iconicity may have seemed to the advocates, this sense sprang from an interaction between historical representations of Coney Island and particular types of experience in the neighborhood. This section discusses those experiences and their relation to Coney Island's place-image and materiality. The advocates' recollections often elided a categorical distinction between image and experience. In the telling, experience moves inevitably past the immediacy of the moment and into the realm of representation. Ultimately, the difference between the two is one of emphasis. The advocates' image of the neighborhood, I derived from their attempts to explain the importance of Coney

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<sup>268</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2012.

<sup>269</sup> Interview with advocate, September 26, 2012.

Island and to capture its essence. Their sense of “the Coney Island experience,” I based on their descriptions of what they enjoy doing during their visits. These accounts, however, were only occasionally distinct. Just as often, they blurred the boundaries between image and experience, reflecting the mutually reinforcing nature of the two.

A place-image can shape the experience of a place, influencing what one perceives and how one perceives it. Conversely, experience can shape the representation of a place, affecting one’s interpretation of it. Advocates’ depictions of Coney Island reflected both dynamics.

When you’re a stranger and you’re searching for Coney Island, for a while, it was completely embodied in that corner with Nathan’s. That’s the neon signs. That’s the bright light. That’s the critical mass. If all that was left of Coney Island was that corner, people from all over the world would be photographing the shit out of that one corner, and they would feel like they saw something.<sup>270</sup>

The experience of iconicity described in this example presupposes a familiarity with an image of Coney Island. Nathan’s street corner can only epitomize the neighborhood in light of a particular vision of the place. Its tourist appeal as a local landmark depends on the pervasiveness of that vision. The image of “honky tonk” Coney Island, the Poor Man’s Riviera, lends meaning to the encounter with the corner restaurant, just as that encounter modifies that image.

If you happened upon Nathan’s without knowing anything about the neighborhood you would still notice its neon signs, the diverse clientele, and the beach in the

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<sup>270</sup> Interview with advocate, October 17, 2012.

distance. You might hear the din of the amusement rides and catch a whiff of the hot dogs. The quality of that experience will produce an image of the place and affect your view of representations of Nathan's you might encounter in the future. Some advocates described this very process, recalling how prior experiences in the neighborhood shaped their initial encounters with its history.

Author: When did you become aware of Coney Island's history?

Interviewee: I began to learn what I almost instinctively knew. Because I knew that there was a tremendous amount of sociological and architectural and artistic depth to the place. You could just feel it in the place. It didn't spring out of nowhere. It wasn't like a theme park.<sup>271</sup>

The impression formed by this advocate during early visits led him to investigate local history—a history that he would have engaged in terms of what he already knew. His experience of the place would have helped him interpret representations of the past just as those representations would have retroactively helped him make sense of his experience.

For members of SCI, the iterative interaction between experience and image unfolded over the course of extensive encounters with Coney Island, image and place. In trying to understand their experience in the neighborhood, which varied as much as their personal histories, I take a narrow focus. I examine points of convergence among their stories and identify recurring themes that shed light on the meaning and value that the group members ascribed to the neighborhood. The development of these themes illuminates the relation between the advocates' experience and their commitment to the area's identity as an iconic amusement destination.

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<sup>271</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

### The Experience of History

The Coney Island experience entailed for members of SCI an encounter with history. This experience evoked earlier eras and calls attention to their distance from everyday life, establishing at once a connection and disconnection with the past. This quality stemmed in part from an intuitive awareness of that history.

I'm not sure I can say exactly why, but I think that historic continuity and historic narrative does inform people's experience of places even if there aren't so many tangible physical reminders.<sup>272</sup>

I enjoy going on the Cyclone roller coaster because it's old. I don't really enjoy going on a newly built roller coaster because there are so many around. You can go to so many different places and you can go on that roller coaster. But when you go on the Cyclone, it's like a unique thing. It's nowhere else in the world.<sup>273</sup>

The experience of historicity, however, did not arise from awareness alone. It also required some degree of correspondence between the neighborhood and a sense of the historic. In some cases, this related to the built environment. The passage of time marks older structures and materials, dating them back to earlier periods. Advocates called attention, for instance, to the smell of old wood in Ruby's and the wild vegetation up the sides of the Thunderbolt. Age also gradually separates older aesthetic sensibilities from contemporary ones, rendering them increasingly unusual. This explains advocates' interest in signage and architectural detail from bygone decades.

A historic experience does not, however, depend exclusively on physical vestiges. Traditional activities and uses, as well as their constitutive parts, also contributed to

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<sup>272</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>273</sup> Interview with advocate, May 15, 2013.

SCI members' sense of Coney Island's historic character. Advocates counted among these, businesses, attractions, and people:

[Arcades] are old classic games. The barkers have their routines. The use of colors and hype... What's classic is that if you went back in time it would probably be pretty much the same.<sup>274</sup>

I just picture this... seeing people that I felt like had been around since Coney Island's heyday. And that Coney Island was still the old [and] was still living through them.<sup>275</sup>

And another thing that I normally don't think of as its history, but really is its history, is the more honky tonk elements, the Mermaid Parade, the general atmosphere that managed to persist.<sup>276</sup>

These disparate elements evoked old Coney Island by association with historic representations, but they also did so on account of qualities that seem anachronistic, regardless of their actual age, in a contemporary amusement context. These included the style of games, the composition of crowds, and even the interactions that constitute the general atmosphere. And the totality of these elements added up to more than the sum of the parts.

[The Coney Island USA Sideshow] has changed over the years, but it's also remained the same. It is one of the true, authentic, old-line things about Coney Island.<sup>277</sup>

There are also the aesthetic elements of a historic place. There's the fact that Nathan's, even though it may not look exactly how it used to look, Nathan's is a physical structure with a degree of commercial continuity. There are old-fashioned places like William's Candy. There's the Wonder Wheel, the Cyclone. There's also the Bowery, just the existence of the Bowery. The grid is something. Jones Walk, the Bowery, Henderson walk, the old style arcade games, throw things... the sort of diversity of businesses. I think that these things all have a historic feel to them. Even the fact that there is such a

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<sup>274</sup> Interview with advocate, August 15, 2012.

<sup>275</sup> Interview with advocate, February 1, 2013.

<sup>276</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>277</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

diversity of types of businesses with small time proprietors. I feel like these are an experience that one doesn't necessarily expect to find in contemporary places of recreation. Everything seems...dissimilar to contemporary commercial landscapes.<sup>278</sup>

In sum, the factors that contributed to the historic character of the Coney Island experience could be tangible like ruins or intangible like the continuation of traditional attractions. They were diffuse and variegated and gave rise to a neighborhood-wide historic atmosphere in the aggregate and through their interaction.

The SCI experience of historic Coney Island discriminated among aspects of the neighborhood's past. It centered specifically on the area's longstanding amusement function. The stories that captured the advocates' interest and imagination may have related to different periods of the amusement area, but they all fit into the larger narrative of Coney Island's role in the history of collective recreation. It was in light of this broader narrative that members of SCI had come to value the spatial and temporal signposts that had created for them a sense of place and that had rendered Coney Island unique.

A sense of place is "This is unmistakably here." There's no place else. You go to it, and you say, "I know just where I am. I look here, and I know exactly what's going to be down here." OK, this might have changed a little, but it's still the same. There's a continuum, and there's a feeling that it's like no place else.<sup>279</sup>

The historical sites and traditions that contributed to Coney Island's sense of place took on significance in proportion to their uniqueness and to the feeling of loss they evoked.

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<sup>278</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>279</sup> Interview with advocate, September 9, 2012.

Vestiges of the amusement area's heyday are scarce and, in the case of physical structures, irreplaceable. They appealed because they reflected the advocates' sense of historical narrative. But if history explained the value of certain neighborhood features, then what explained the value ascribed to history? As a general matter, advocates found that an awareness of the past added a dimension to their neighborhood visits. One likened the effect to riding on a double decker bus:

Author: Why [preserve] the Thunderbolt... for someone who doesn't really care very much about amusements?

Interviewee: Having the amusement park there ties in... it makes it part of a bigger thing, so that when people go there as tourists they see these historical things that are connected to these new things. The same thing I was talking about, history giving depth; it is nice to have some of those visual references. I think it's nice for people that visit to feel connected to, you know, even—when people—this is going to sound really weird. When people come to Manhattan and they're "what should I see? What should I do?" and they want to do something super touristy, they should take the double-decker bus because at street level, you know, it's chain stores and it gets kind of difficult to tell it from other cities, but then when you get that one level up.... So it's like, Coney Island, it's one level out instead of one level up. And it's like you can walk through it instead of having to ride a double-decker bus and see it.<sup>280</sup>

The historical depth described above refers to the capacity of local features to inspire perspectives refracted by images of the past. That perspective allowed advocates to locate their experience in a historical context and to develop a relationship to the place.

It's a place that has continued to, in many ways, serve some of the functions that it served historically. It fits into a narrative. And I think that I, by experiencing Coney Island's virtues today, my experience feels connected to the past.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Interview with advocate, February 28, 2013.

<sup>281</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

The experience of history resulted in a sense of personal attachment. That experience was grounded in the present. It did not consist primarily of reminiscence. (In fact, advocates showed little patience for people whose interest in Coney Island consists principally of recollections of past visits.<sup>282</sup>) In other words, the connection to place described by advocates did not arise predominantly from personal history, but from a present investment in the history of Coney Island amusements. This raises the question of why this particular history (and with it, the vestigial remains it brings to life [and vice versa]) came to matter to members of SCI.

Advocates justified their desire to preserve aspects of Coney Island in terms of their historic importance. Asked to explain what made them historic and why this history mattered, they alluded to the broad public perception of Coney Island to argue that, because Coney Island had played a part in so many people's lives, its history had long become a matter of public concern.<sup>283</sup> The public support and media attention that typically surrounds preservation campaigns in the neighborhood does lend weight to this impression. General public interest, however, does not explain why advocates themselves viewed local history as worthy of their interest and time, especially in the case of those who had never visited or known the neighborhood in any of its former "historic" incarnations.

The claim by advocates that Coney Island forms part of the heritage of the city, the country, and even the world, implies a community—a community whose heritage it is and that defines itself, at least in part, in relation to the neighborhood. In their

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<sup>282</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

<sup>283</sup> Interview with advocate, February 8, 2013.

explanations of Coney Island's historical importance, however, members of SCI did not claim a privileged connection to the neighborhood for themselves by virtue of their status as citizens of the world, as Americans, or even as New Yorkers. Although they unanimously valued Coney Islands' heritage, they shared no bonds that bound them all as members of a community. They were not fellow travelers and they neither self-identified nor had been identified as such. A few did bring to bear group categories with which they identified. Those with an affinity for the working class, for instance, stressed Coney Island's affordability as well as its prominent history as a destination for working class recreation.<sup>284</sup> Those who performed in Coney Island highlighted the receptiveness of local audiences to a wide range of performing arts, as well as the neighborhood's role in the history of various forms of spectacle.<sup>285</sup> Most members of SCI, however, claimed neither connection nor did they explain Coney Island's heritage value in terms of a group identity. What did bind the group together was a collective investment in the neighborhood's history—a commitment shared even by members who, having only a passing familiarity with it, combined historical tidbits into an undifferentiated whole. Membership in this sort of a community, however—a community that results from a common interest—cannot itself explain the interest that led to its formation to begin with. I therefore do not try to explain the significance of Coney Island's historicity in terms of the shared identity implied by the notion of heritage. Instead, I find an explanation in the relation between historicity and valued dimensions of the visitors' experience.

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<sup>284</sup> Interview with advocate, August 10, 2012.

<sup>285</sup> Interview with advocate, July 17, 2013.

I have organized these dimensions around three concepts: authenticity, diversity, and liminality.<sup>286</sup> Authenticity emphasizes the unmediated quality of an experience. Diversity stresses the otherness in an encounter. Liminality refers to the transgression of the ordinary. These dimensions both reflected and confirmed for the advocates Coney Island's historicity, explaining their investment in the neighborhood's past. While I discuss them in turn, these notions overlap both conceptually and in the advocates' accounts. An authentic experience is an encounter with otherness as well as a move past the threshold of conventional appearances. An engagement with diversity implies an authentic presentation of otherness as well as a move beyond the comfort of sameness. For present purposes, however, we are less concerned with the ontology of the concepts as with their usefulness in helping us make sense of the advocates' experience in Coney Island. The following sections therefore develop these notions with the specific focus of illuminating the relation between that experience and the area's historic value or iconic identity.

### ***Authenticity***

*"I'm Coney Island, and I am what I am. Either love me or get back on the train."*<sup>287</sup>

Authenticity refers to the unmediated quality of an experience. This operated on several dimensions. It applied to behavior perceived as genuine; to artistic expression that seemed to reflect the artists' individuality; and to processes that, through longstanding association with a place, appeared to convey something true about it. More generally, authenticity suggested an immediacy between the

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<sup>286</sup> The concepts of authenticity, diversity, and liminality each has a complicated genealogy and has been the object of extensive academic debate. I am grounding my usage, however, exclusively on the advocates' discussion of the terms and of related themes.

<sup>287</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

expression and its source, and the possibility of gaining access through that immediacy to the essential.

Advocates associated authenticity with examples of people “being themselves.” Their accounts equated authenticity with departures from everyday conventions and focused either on eccentric individuals or on “regular” people who behave extravagantly in Coney Island. Because many local attractions and spectacles involve artful displays of eccentricity, the label of authenticity also attached to forms of performance that seemed to reflect the performer’s individual spirit. Examples included burlesque routines, carnival barker ballyies,<sup>288</sup> and Mermaid Parade costumes and floats.

I’ve always loved the Mermaid Parade. There was a kind of sense of sheer performative, everybody, ... it’s kind of excessive, but everybody is engaging in whatever quirky, sometimes showy display of self that they feel like. And that’s always this fantastic thing.<sup>289</sup>

In the advocates’ telling, Coney Island’s ample opportunities for performance and the district’s relaxed atmosphere had encouraged a virtuous cycle of self-presentation. Common displays of public exuberance had helped give the area a reputation for inclusiveness and for attracting “real characters.” This reputation had in turn created an expectation of acceptance and encouraged social liberties that might have seemed less prudent elsewhere. As a result, people in Coney Island were more likely to engage in behavior that came across as “authentic.”

Ruby’s and other bars that used to be there are not like normal bars. There’s just something about it. You just sit there and you feel different in that bar. You’re more accepted in that bar. Where else will a girl come up to you and

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<sup>288</sup> A bally or ballyhoo refers to the loud and sensational pitch or advertisement that a barkers or operators use to lure people to their attractions.

<sup>289</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

grab you by the crotch and stick her boob in your face? That was Ruby's. You don't see that... in a bar in Williamsburg. You're just sitting there having a beer, and a girl comes up in a bikini and grabs you by the nuts, and then stuffs her boob in your face and says, "Nice to meet you." It's like inhibitions go out the window down there.<sup>290</sup>

Because self-expression can assume different forms, authenticity can have multiple dimensions. It therefore applied to a variety of media beyond personal presentation and performance. Advocates used the language of authenticity to describe graphic art, signage, and amusement rides. In doing so, they focused on a work's uniqueness, originality, or unpolished quality. These attributes, which were often signaled by the artist or designer's personal touch, implied an immediacy between the expression and its source.

The art is better in the old rides. I guess it feels like people made it. And not like it's a mass-produced thing. Because it feels handmade, it feels like someone cared who painted this skull. You can feel the hands of the makers.<sup>291</sup>

Interviewee: I have a thing for hand painted signs.

Author: Why do you think it's nicer?

Interviewee: Because it reflects the personality of the owner and the individuality of the business. Just to have a homogenized look across the board, it just makes it too Disney.<sup>292</sup>

Like "authentic" performance and behavior, authentic design appears in these examples to offer a glimpse of an individual essence, unclouded by imitation, formulas, or studied polish.

In the case of older works of graphic art and architecture, authenticity arose from more than a handmade appearance. Signs of wear and old-fashioned aesthetics

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<sup>290</sup> Interview with advocate, March 15, 2013.

<sup>291</sup> Interview with advocate, August 17, 2012.

<sup>292</sup> Interview with advocate, August 10, 2012.

denoted uniqueness not through the individuality of their source, but through age. Having survived through the years, older work seemed to provide an ever rarer opportunity to come into touch with a voice from the past.

Author: [Why do you like Nathan's]

Interviewee: I just love authentic places.

Author: What makes it authentic?

Interviewee: Knowing that it was the original. The neon is old. And I loved how it looked, how they used to have these old ketchup dispensers from the 40s that were kind of disgusting. The stainless steel everywhere; that isn't there as much anymore.

Author: So part of the appeal was aesthetic? What about it?

Interviewee: It's historic. It speaks of another era. Knowing that it was the original. I'm so happy that the original is still in existence, and I can see elements of it that have been around for decades.<sup>293</sup>

In the advocates' descriptions, erosion and weathering not only authenticated the manifestation of voices from the past; they also rendered places and objects authentic through the distinctiveness of their tracings. Advocates associated authenticity and realness with "organic" processes. Signs of wear did more than verify age; they constituted idiosyncratic markings left by the passage of time. Places and things that had evolved "organically" became authentic in their uniqueness and immediacy. They seemed to present themselves in their essence, unmediated and for consumption. This distinction contributed to the intuition that even an exact replica of a place loses the original's authenticity.

I don't know that you could just construct a new Times Square somewhere, even if it's more Times Square-y than the current Times Square, I don't know that it would be as special in the same way as Times Square.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>294</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

Advocates characterized authenticity resulting from organic processes primarily in terms of aesthetic individuality.

Interviewee: [The decay] was genuine. It was just genuine, and something that I had never seen before. And it just felt authentic and unapologetic. And I was drawn to that.

Author: Why unapologetic?

Interviewee: It was like I got to Coney Island, and they're like, "I'm Coney Island, and I am what I am. Either love me or get back on the train."

Author: Can you manufacture the grittiness?

Interviewee: You really can't manufacture Coney Island. 'Cause it's so authentic. It's just so unlike any other place I've ever been to. Yeah, you could go for a Brooklyn diner look, but it's the uniqueness of it. It's not just the physical buildings or the rides.<sup>295</sup>

This uniqueness of the historically authentic, however, was not solely formal. It also related to the countless stories evoked by the layered changes that had accumulated over time.

There's something organic that happens when something is allowed to exist for a period of time. It gets character. It's not just deterioration. A whole history builds up.<sup>296</sup>

Age, then, renders places and objects authentic by transforming them into unique expressions of unique histories.

In the advocates' accounts, the passage of time did not need to leave a physical trace in order to impart an air of authenticity. In the case of longstanding practices, it could also do so by lending them legitimacy and turning them into local traditions. When advocates characterized the Freak Show as authentic, they were referring to seemingly contradictory aspects of those performances: their individuality and their conventionality. One the one hand, a freak show act

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<sup>295</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

<sup>296</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

reflected the unique vision of its creator and performer. On the other, it conformed to a series of conventions that made it recognizable as such. This provided two sources of authenticity, the apparent identity between the performance and the performer, and the longstanding association between the type of performance and the place.

Freak shows and other Coney Island spectacles, attractions, and artistic conventions had, by enduring in place over many years, become local traditions. Members of SCI identified them with Coney Island and vice-versa. These traditions felt authentic to them because, in their unique association with the place, they seemed to convey something true about it.

[Coney Island USA] runs a real sideshow. It's a working sideshow, not Disney's version or Broadway's version of what a freak show or sideshow should be. There's that sense of authenticity, that sense that the games—that at least the ones that remain on the Bowery—are run by carnies, real carnies; be careful.<sup>297</sup>

The authenticity of the spectacle described by this advocate depended on its enduring association with Coney Island. Held elsewhere, like at a Manhattan corporate party, it might have come across as incongruous, contrived, and fake. In Coney Island, however, it felt like they belonged—like it formed part of the landscape. Its historic presence had given it an air of timelessness, allowing it to reflect part of the essence of the place.

The examples above show authentic encounters in various guises—encounters that appeared to convey something essential. The mark of the essence may have

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<sup>297</sup> Interview with advocate, May 22, 2013.

consisted of traces of handcraft, displays of eccentricity, or grit. But the logic of the encounter remained the same. It presented an enhanced access to the unique identity of something or someone. The possibility of authentic expression appealed to advocates both as participants and as observers. As participants, it offered a chance to achieve one's creative promise. As observers, it presented an opportunity to establish a unique, personal connection. Coney Island served as a favorable setting for both. In relation to places like Disney World (a frequent counter-example given by advocates), where you interact with trained employees and purchase and consume packaged products and experiences, Coney Island lacked pretense. It allowed more room to interact with people and places in their "unpackaged" form.

Describing an authentic experience as unpackaged or unmediated paints it as an enhanced form of passive consumption or voyeurism—a more direct form, unencumbered by conventional formulas or expectations. Advocates, however, did not regard these encounters as passive. They, in fact, underscored the effort they required. The "rawness" of the authentic offered only a possibility of personal engagement, not an assurance of it. Unlike packaged products or places, which anticipate and try to prescribe the manner of their consumption, the authentic is "unapologetic."<sup>298</sup> It does not try to please. Relative to a Disney ride, the Mermaid Parade, the ruins of the Thunderbolt, and the arcades on the Bowery did not simplify themselves for your convenience. You encountered them messy and complex. Interacting with them presented a challenge. It required active participation and discernment. It was not something you could buy. If advocates

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<sup>298</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

were drawn to Coney Island by the promise of authenticity, they were drawn to authenticity by the pleasures that the elusive search for it entailed.

The possibility of an unmediated connection may ultimately prove illusory; but the search itself can evidently result in a personal investment in the neighborhood.

Advocates' attachment to Coney Island stemmed, in part, from a sense that both as participants and observers they have personally contributed to its appeal.

### ***Diversity***

*"I mean you had black, oriental, white, Italian, I mean, I'm Irish, [John] was Italian. You had, you know, Barracuda; I don't know what he was, but he had these women who barely spoke English if any and they were Hungarian. I mean you just had such a hodgepodge."<sup>299</sup>*

Diversity emphasizes the otherness in an encounter. In this case, it referred not just to a variety of people or to a variety of buildings, shops, and rides, but to an interaction between the two—to a variety of people doing a variety of things. What set diversity in Coney Island apart in the advocates' view was how it was experienced. It went beyond passive people watching. Because of the many activities that brought spectators and participants into direct contact with each other, and because people at leisure let their guard down, visits to Coney Island involved an unusual amount of contact among strangers of all stripes.

Advocates uniformly regarded diversity as one of Coney Island's defining attractions. Their ideas about the area's diversity overlapped with those about its

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<sup>299</sup> Interview with advocate, June 5, 2013.

authenticity. Diversity, however, referred to the variety of experiences rather than to their “realness.” Advocates applied the term, first of all, to local crowds.

By diversity, I mean racial and ethnic and somewhat economic as well. My interaction with it was primarily as an observer—sitting on the beach and watching people from around the world with all different colors of skin frolic in the surf. There was music, too--the Puerto Rican salsa club on the boardwalk was always entertaining. On the pier I would see Asian and Caribbean fishermen pulling up spider crabs in their traps. Or Hispanic vendors walking the beach with their racks of cotton candy or mangos. A lot of these characters ended up in my paintings.<sup>300</sup>

I also think that the Boardwalk itself still offers a real glimpse of the masses of the city in ways you don't often see. I suppose it connects to my earlier comments about the diversity being very much on display. I'm reminded of a Cyclones game last summer, during one of the incredibly hot 104 heat index days; my friends and I walked down the Boardwalk afterwards, and he was just stunned by the masses of people, the incredible numbers of families and young people and old people and everyone that were stalking the boardwalk, some with purpose, some with none, some paying for rides, and others just pushing carts and strollers and hanging out. My friend made a comment about being out there with all of humanity-- and while I knew it was a tad hyperbolic, he's someone incredibly well-traveled, who was a bit awed by the scene. Not by the amusements, of course, but just by what the boardwalk scene was like. And he's someone who, in his New York day-to-day of commuting to mid-town, would not be experiencing moments of relaxation and leisure with that cross-section of people.<sup>301</sup>

The size and heterogeneity of Coney Island crowds made people-watching one of the great local amenities. Advocates regarded the neighborhood as a place where simply everybody goes, regardless of race, age, nationality, or income, and where everyone feels welcome. For many, this inclusiveness distinguished Coney Island from the rest of the city.

Interviewee: To me, Coney Island is probably one of the last places I have found where you can be whoever you are. It's okay here. Coney Island has no judgment. I don't mean poor judgment. [Laughter] In Coney Island, nobody cares, so if you want to dress up, if you want

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<sup>300</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2012.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

to be naked, if you want to be super conservative, if you want to completely modify yourself, whatever you want is okay right here.

Author: And this happens everywhere?

Interviewee: I think in Coney Island that happens, but only in Coney Island. I think as soon as you start to take that out of here there's a lot more judgment. I think it's one of the things that has always drawn me to Coney Island.<sup>302</sup>

Advocate depictions of diversity did not revolve exclusively around people. They also stressed the area's lively mix of businesses, attractions, and structures. These accounts complemented each other and called attention to the presentation of diversity rather than merely to its categories. It was not just who the people were, but what they were doing; not just what the buildings or businesses were, but what happened around them. This interaction was made possible by the neighborhood's openness and accessibility. On the one hand, anyone could get there from anywhere in the City for the price of a subway ride and, once there, find hours of recreation for a low price. On the other, the neighborhood's physical layout put crowds on display. Most activities in the area took place outdoors or in venues that were open to the outdoors. So everywhere you turned, you found people engaged in all manner of pursuit. Access and openness alone, however, did not distinguish Coney Island from other public venues. What made it stand apart was the variety and quality of activities in the area and the interaction that these facilitated. The diversity in the neighborhood had a carnivalesque character that resulted from the confluence of assorted spaces of leisure within a confined area. The density of these activities and the nature of some of them produced unexpected encounters that might not have arisen in places devoted to singular pursuits.

Author: How is it different from a regular park space? Central Park?

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<sup>302</sup> Interview with advocate, May 22, 2013.

Interviewee: The crowds drawn to Coney Island are more diverse in some ways than the crowds drawn to even Central Park. [In] Coney Island, I think you have opportunities for a more variegated experience than you do at, say, your average park. People are also engaged more in activities; in a park, one's usually engaged in a more private activity, whereas on the beach or on the rides, you're more engaged; you're riding the ride with other people with whom you might not be in any way engaged at Central Park.<sup>303</sup>

Attractions such as arcade games, rides, and parades not only made people part of the attraction, they facilitated contact among participants and spectators. Public interaction—both around attractions and throughout the district—was further encouraged by Coney Island’s relaxed atmosphere. People came to Coney Island to unwind and to have a good time. Because they did and because they sensed that everyone else does, they let their guard down among strangers, becoming more open and accepting of whatever or whomever they might encounter during their visit. Diversity in Coney Island was therefore distinguished not just by its extent, but by how it was experienced.

Advocates valued diversity for the voyeuristic thrill of witnessing the exotic—of seeing how different people behave and of trying to understand their stories.<sup>304</sup> They also regarded encounters with diversity as a salutary challenge to personal assumptions about others and about the rest of the world.<sup>305</sup> Coney Island offered an exceptional venue for either purpose. First, its crowds were typically larger and more diverse in more ways than elsewhere. Secondly, the district’s leisurely atmosphere cast diversity in a positive light, downplaying differences that might appear unbridgeable in other contexts. This encouraged even advocates who never initiated conversations with strangers to do so in Coney Island, where they found

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<sup>303</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>304</sup> Interview with advocate, September 6, 2012.

<sup>305</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2012.

people more approachable. Because this receptiveness lowered the stakes of talking to strangers, advocates with children described Coney Island as a favorable context for learning how to negotiate difference.<sup>306</sup> This ease of interaction made possible a more participatory and profound encounter with diversity than voyeurism generally allows.

Interviewee: [Diversity] is something that I value. I really like to see people, and observe people, and study them, and figure out their stories. So that's a great place to go and see that diversity. And I love how everybody that goes there, they're just going there to have fun. And let lose, get away from everyday routine, the bore of everyday routine. Or the stress of everyday routine. I think everybody's, for the most part, in a better place when they're out there. But another fascinating thing, when I worked out there, I got to know the local colorful characters, shall we say. And some of them, they were, even they, were just really happy. And more relaxed than some of the colorful characters you're going to find here in Manhattan on a street corner.

Author: So your interaction with this diversity is largely as people watching. Or do you go mingle with folks.

Interviewee: It's a mix. There are so many people, as you well know, when you go out there on a summer day, especially, there are crowds of people. So I'll take in people, do a little people watching. But I also like to interact with people, too. So I would interact with different people as well.

Author: Is this something that one can do elsewhere in the city?

Interviewee: Not really, no.<sup>307</sup>

Like authenticity, Coney Island's diversity had become, in the advocates' accounts, a self-perpetuating feature of the local landscape. The area's reputation for inclusiveness had created an expectation of acceptance and diversity, which attracted people drawn to Coney Island crowds. A familiarity with this tradition had increased SCI members' self-awareness and thereby enhanced their enjoyment of diversity.

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<sup>306</sup> Interview with advocate, May 22, 2013.

<sup>307</sup> Interview with advocate, September 6, 2012.

Interviewee: I should add that one other dimension to my Coney Island experience is that it makes me feel very patriotic. There's a lot of displays of the flag. It's a lot of people coming together, like as I said, in a diverse, democratic space that cuts across many dimensions of society. I think that the iconography and the underlining ideals of the place, or the ideals that are reflected in the place, play off each other nicely.

Author: And the ideals are the democratic inclusion?

Interviewee: The democratic, inclusive, diverse, coming together to participate in leisure. It's a great public amenity. It's a place where people can come together and enjoy themselves.<sup>308</sup>

While members of SCI may have romanticized Coney Island's tradition of inclusiveness, their embrace of the ideal of diversity and their willingness to engage with local crowds accordingly contributed to the realization of that ideal and to the perpetuation of that tradition.

### ***Liminality***

*"The Sideshow didn't even feel legal."*<sup>309</sup>

Liminality refers to a transgression of the ordinary—to an escape from everyday life or even to a suspension of conventional norms. For member of SCI, this arose in connection to Coney Island's carnivalesque atmosphere and to features that encouraged a sense of spatial and temporal departure from the rest of the city, such as historic vestiges and juxtapositions of physical elements. These qualities perpetuated neighborhood's reputation as a world apart that operated according to its own rules and that accommodated activities that pushed the boundaries of propriety. Themes relating to liminality surfaced in advocate accounts of diversity and authenticity, occasionally overlapping with those two concepts. The emphasis of the liminal, however, lay in the transgression itself and not in the encounter with otherness or with variety.

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<sup>308</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>309</sup> October 17, 2012.

Advocates described Coney Island as a place of escape—a place to break free from daily lives and routines. Coney Island's location at the outermost edge of the city reinforced this sense of liberation. But beyond being a physical threshold, Coney Island also represented a symbolic threshold, giving the impression that when you got off the subway at the Stillwell Avenue station, you had arrived somewhere altogether different, even if you had travelled only one subway stop to get there.

In advocates' depictions, Coney Island inverted common representations of New York City. It was low-density, open-air, colorful, and affordable; while New York was high-density, enclosed, and expensive. Coney Island faced the beachfront and encouraged leisure; while New York turned its back on its waterfront and emphasized work. More generally, Coney Island's incongruous juxtaposition of beach, carnival, and urban landscape offered a jolting contrast from typical urban surroundings. Standing on Surf Avenue, the area's main commercial strip, you could see the ocean in the distance and amusement rides all around you. You could still pick up the odor of New York streets, but it was commingled with the smell of the ocean, cotton candy, and amusement ride grease. From several rides you could catch sight of both semi-naked people on the beach and skyscrapers on the horizon.

You've been in the city for a couple months, you know, and suddenly you're at the beach. And you forget in New York that we're surrounded by water. Coney Island was the first beach that I saw in New York. I knew it was there, but when you see it, it's quite another thing. You step off the subway and you smell the salt air. You're at the beach and you just got off the train, so it's a crazy contrast.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

The streets and yelling... the sounds, the smells, all of it—to the beauty of the bright blue sky, the parachute jump dance, and the ocean's waves. [The beauty and the fright of it] were intermingled at the edge of the boardwalk, like when you would get off the subway and (don't forget, I'm remembering the old train station) the first thing you would hit is Philip's Candy. And you would be hit with that sweet, sweet saccharin-y smell of the cotton candy and the giant lollipops which were enormous, they were like creatures and beautiful, the hand lettered signage. So, we would leave that train station and this place was like the introduction of the Coney Island world, so you were out in the bright sunlight, the cacophony of sound and scariness and excitement hit you.<sup>311</sup>

Several venues in Coney Island, like Feltman's or Ruby's, had internalized and reproduced some of the juxtapositions described by members of SCI, offering an indoor-outdoor experience that combined amusements, dining, entertainment, and beachfront view, and that thereby deepened the sense of remove from everyday city life. Other activities had fostered that sense by inviting visitors to immerse themselves in the excitement of their surroundings. These ranged from organized displays of the titillating, bizarre, and unusual—like Coney Island USA's Sideshow—to uncoordinated public outbursts.

There's an element of surprise. Like, you can go there and something will happen. You don't know what it is. Maybe there's fire works, maybe there's a marching band. But something is going to be going on that you didn't plan for in your day. And you're going to be like, "Oh, I went there, and there was this amazing hula hoop competition," or whatever. Cause there's always stuff going on there that you don't know about. So there's a big element of surprise fun, a possibility of surprise fun.<sup>312</sup>

Oh, I thought [the Sideshow] was phenomenal, I thought it was right in line with this feeling that you get when you go there sometimes, and you feel that you're a part of this incredibly surprising thing. What people feel even when they go to the Polar Bear swim. It's totally surprising, and that's how I felt every time I went out there to see shows. I think it's the huge sense of potential, and I think it's also a very liberating feeling, because it's different and surprising and unexpected, and it feels a little less regulated. I think that's why people like to see the Sideshow.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

<sup>312</sup> Interview with advocate, August 17, 2012.

<sup>313</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

In their totality, then, Coney Island's events and attractions generated a dizzying mix of sounds, lights, and smells that saturated and even disoriented the senses.

Author: What conveyed the carnivalesque?

Interviewee: All of it. It was this overwhelming sense everywhere you went down here back then. There was just music everywhere, rides moving, and lights, and smells of like cotton candy and candy apples and hot dogs and sausage, people selling things out of baskets in the beach... and it didn't close.<sup>314</sup>

Advocates characterized the amusement district as "intoxicating" and "pulsating with life." They shared a fondness for getting lost in the alleys of the amusement district, being engulfed by the commotion, and abandoning themselves to whatever happened. Their accounts portrayed visits to Coney Island as transporting experiences—as trips to somewhere distant and different. This sense of dislocation was not just spatial, but also temporal. For those who grew up visiting amusement parks, and especially for those who grew up going to Coney Island, the neighborhood's sights and sounds evoked memories of childhood wonder: the Wonder Wheel's mechanism; the Cyclone whooshing down the tracks;<sup>315</sup> candy apple displays<sup>316</sup>; the subway doors opening at Stillwell station.<sup>317</sup> The triggers may have varied, but they all inspired a sense of comfort and abandon.

I love the feeling that I get when the train turns and I can see the Wonder Wheel. That never gets old. When I see the Wonder Wheel, I do get a little bit emotional. I didn't even go on it that much as a child, but it's very comforting seeing that thing. I love the landscape, I love the way it looks when you're on the train and you're about to leave the train. It's comforting, but with a sense of anticipation.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Interview with advocate, May 22, 2013.

<sup>315</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

<sup>316</sup> Interview with advocate, October 17, 2012.

<sup>317</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>318</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

Author: Why is it [Coney Island] exciting?

Interviewee: Cause it kind of makes you feel like a kid, I guess. It's kind of an escape, I guess. You feel, even as a teenager, teenagers don't like to do things, cause it's not cool, but it's almost like you're never too old for Coney Island. You can go there, you can be a kid, even though you're an adult. You have this reckless abandonment.

Author: You talked about being a kid, and about escape. Are those two related or two separate things?

Interviewee: They're dovetailed. They really are. I guess it is a journey. Going some place that's completely unlike any other part of the city. Cause it is a long train ride, depending on where you live. It's not a long train ride for me now, but it's still magical. There's just this excitement.<sup>319</sup>

For members of SCI, the distance travelled by subway to Coney Island consisted of more than just space. These visits provoked memories and a different way of relating to the neighborhood.

The impression of leaving the present behind did not always depend on personal history. It also arose from a sense that Coney Island was a place out of time—a time capsule of New York City's past. Local vestiges encouraged this sense by summoning associations to different eras of the amusement district.

The Wonder Wheel, the Cyclone, the Thunderbolt, Nathan's with that great neon signage, the original signage is still there. So you only have very limited relics. But at the same time, I could just feel the energy. I could feel the ghosts. I could feel like it was a place where people had come to be happy. There was just this leftover energy that I was looking for. And so I wasn't disappointed when I went down there.<sup>320</sup>

Interviewee: I mean, why do people like old houses as opposed to new houses? Some people like old houses, some people like new houses?

Author: I don't know. Why do you think they like old houses?

Interviewee: They know things, they've seen things, they have secrets, they live longer than we can.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Interview with advocate, August 10, 2012.

<sup>320</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

<sup>321</sup> Interview with advocate, August 7, 2012.

It's almost more magical for it to be nothing. Not that I don't... I want things to be in Coney Island. But I think for me, at that point in time, it was almost ghostlike to go there and to know what had been there before, and what wasn't there now. Being slightly decrepit. I always felt that the bank building was really magical. I loved to stare at that building, and peek in the broken windows and stare inside. The Shore Theater as well, I always got a kick out of that one, too.<sup>322</sup>

The recurring language of ghosts and magic highlighted the suggestive nature of physical remains and their capacity to intrigue and inspire exploration. This quality operated in conjunction with the two features discussed at the beginning of this section to create an illusion of going back in time. The first were the incongruous juxtapositions that set Coney Island apart from the rest of the city; the second consisted of associations with amusement parks from childhood; and now we have a third, the evocation of a past unrelated to personal history. The following example illustrates how, together, these three qualities gave rise to a feeling of temporal disjunction.

Interviewee: I felt like [Coney Island] was just really thrilling and exciting. It was a thrilling exciting place, because I felt like I had gone back in time. So for me, part of the appeal of New York is kind of the fact that you can kind of sense the history of the place through the structures of the buildings. I think that the mere fact that it's old is interesting in and of itself, but also the fact that there is a story behind, like, all the older buildings. And they seem to have... they're more beautiful than steel and glass structures that people are trying to put up on the cheap just to make money.

Author: Trip back in time. What aspects gave you that impression?

Interviewee: I think it was the old buildings, the structures on Surf Avenue. And it was this otherworldly place as well. With the amusements on the beach. And then it also reminded me of [back home], and I have great memories of [back home]. So it was a combination of all three.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Interview with advocate, September 7, 2012.

<sup>323</sup> Interview with advocate, September 6, 2012.

In this case, it was old buildings that brought to mind aspects of New York and Coney Island's past. In others, it was old amusement rides, signage, or even types of people, "characters" who seemed to have been around since Coney Island's heyday.<sup>324</sup> These vestiges pointed to several eras of the amusement district and invited engagement with stories about the neighborhood's history.

The sense of temporal and spatial distance from contemporary New York City also rested on Coney Island's longstanding reputation as a place of escape, transgression, and exuberance. Advocates compared the area to the "wild west," underscoring the contrast between Coney Island and the rest of the city and evoking earlier periods during which the neighborhood was renowned for its frenzied atmosphere.<sup>325</sup> Many aspects of the neighborhood had helped perpetuate this reputation. Attractions like beaches and carnival businesses had done so by accommodating behavior that would be unacceptable in everyday contexts. Others, like the Coney Island USA Freak Show, had gone so far as to aestheticize transgression and turn it into performance.

[The rides] felt like they were from an earlier, much more innocent time, too. There was nothing modern or thrilling about those kinds of rides now. But those really interested me. Shoot the Freak. That to me was also one of the most shocking things from first seeing Coney Island, the first time, that really gave the place this Wild West quality. Having people shooting at a live human target. I liked the barkers, even I really liked the harassing barkers associated with that game.<sup>326</sup>

The Sideshow didn't even feel legal. When we went in it, it didn't even feel legal as a space. It felt like we could just combust on fire, and there would be no way out. It felt very edgy to be in there, like, "How do we get out of here if anything happens?" It was extremely hot, there was no air conditioning, there were snakes, there's a guy putting nails in his nose,

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<sup>324</sup> Interviews with advocates, February 1, 2013; May 15, 2013.

<sup>325</sup> Interview with advocate, August 3, 2012; February 1, 2013; July 3, 2013.

<sup>326</sup> Interview with advocate, August 3, 2012.

there's guys lifting things with their nose from a hook. It just felt like, "How did these people get here, and what is going on here?" This is a tradition. I got to the Sideshow and I was like, "They are keeping something alive that's really pretty old." I will never forget that day in my life. I think if you think about days you might reflect on for the rest of your life, it seems infinite, like Paul Bowles says, it seems limitless, but it's really not. It's one of those days. I'll always remember that Coney Island day.<sup>327</sup>

These examples illustrate how the excitement of transgressive attractions confounded expectations and forced spectators to grapple with unfamiliar situations over which they felt limited control. The thrill of the unexpected also took other less benign forms. At its most extreme, it carried the threat of danger—a threat that at least some advocates found perversely exhilarating.

Interviewee: If you went there in the summer, you had to really be careful. Or even if you went sometimes in the off-season. It was a very specific energy. It was so much color. And so intense. And you really felt like you had to be careful. At least I did, being alone. I know people have written before about the feast of the senses of walking through Coney Island. And it was totally that. So much energy. But also dangerous, it felt like... it also felt very much like being on the edge.

Author: So that was a positive thing?

Interviewee: Yeah, that was a positive. I wouldn't go there if I didn't feel like... I mean, if I didn't want to experience that, then I wouldn't go there.<sup>328</sup>

When you stepped off the train, it was a really intimidating subway station. It's a long train ride from Manhattan. So when I stepped off the train, I had to go to the bathroom. And, uh, that'll make an impression. So I walked into the bathroom in the subway terminal, and there was a needle floating in the toilet. And I just remember going, "Wow, I am not [back home] anymore." I mean, you felt like you were on a movie set. You were just like, "This is unapologetically raw, in your face." I was nervous. Physically, I felt in danger being there. It was dangerous. Then we walked past Nathan's to the Boardwalk. Ruby's. ChaCha's. Crazy groups of people. Excited to go in the water. Very positive.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Interview with advocate, October 17, 2012.

<sup>328</sup> Interview with advocate, February 1, 2013.

<sup>329</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

Coney Island's "lawless" and freewheeling atmosphere offered the challenge—welcome by some—of confronting situations that pushed you past your comfort level. It also allowed room for daring and transgressive creative activity. To some advocates, this recalled the cultural openness and vitality that they associated with New York City during the 1970s and 80s. They felt that Coney Island provided a space where people could get away with behavior and displays that they could not pull off elsewhere. This gave rise to frequent spontaneous, unmanaged, and extraordinary situations that lent an air of excitement to the area.

The potential that I felt was more social—like during the Mermaid Parade when half of the crowd was barely wearing any clothes. That just doesn't happen on a regular street in Midtown. There was a sense that certain situations could happen in Coney Island—because of the beach and the mix of people and the anything-goes attitude—that just couldn't happen anywhere else in the city. For the first few years of visiting Coney Island I felt that it was one of the last places in New York City where that kind of free spirit was still alive and thriving.<sup>330</sup>

### **Heritage Value and its Dimensions**

I have argued that the advocates' sense of Coney Island's heritage value arose less from a sense of collective identity than from various dimensions of a Coney Island experience—dimensions that I have categorized as authenticity, diversity, and liminality. The advocates' accounts linked heritage value to these experiential dimensions in three ways: in terms of their expectations; as a legitimization of their experience; and by reference to contemporary urban life. First, historical representations of Coney Island created an expectation of what the experience there should be. Secondly, Coney Island's historicity legitimated the Coney Island experience by associating it with a historic tradition. Finally, and conversely, the

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<sup>330</sup> Interview with advocate, September 13, 2012.

perceived rarity of the Coney Island experience reinforced its connection to the neighborhood's storied past. I discuss each in turn.

First, a variety of sources gave advocates a sense of what they should expect to encounter in Coney Island. For those who grew up going to Coney Island before the mid-1960s, the area's history was, at least to some extent, a personal history. Their views about the neighborhood arose partly from recollections of its former size, popularity, and fame. Memories of the Coney Island of their youth still colored their visits today. While this led some to lament the area's decline, it also informed their views of what should have been found there, in however diminished form; and this consisted of crowds, thrills, and the unexpected. For members of SCI without childhood memories of the area, the primary references for local history consisted of popular representations and of stories from past visitors. We have discussed their shared familiarity with images of Coney Island's extravagant golden years and of its rough-and-tumble post-war decades. These representations, coupled with stories from friends and family of their respective Coney Island escapades, provided a historical context for visits to the neighborhood and gave rise to a series of expectations. Advocates went to Coney Island anticipating "a wild place," "a fun place," and "a place full of crowds and characters," but also an "authentic" place—a place that had historically and famously always been thus. As a result, they arrived primed to realize those expectations as spectators and participants, to discover ghosts of the past, and to engage with the local history.

Part of the emotional quality of seeing [Coney Island], is just seeing something totally different. Totally different. There's an anticipation to visiting Coney Island due to its uniqueness: you're always conscious of experiencing something very unique while there, with a distinct history, and that is part of its difference. I was probably always aware to a certain

degree—even before I read the books about the place—that its history of amusement, leisure, popular culture offered the kind of experience you didn’t find elsewhere. So visiting it now does somehow retain a small sense of that... which is confusing to explain, since there is so little of it actually there... there’s something about the kind of difference that it brings to Coney Island, that Coney Island attracts, that I do truly find fascinating.<sup>331</sup>

Second, Coney Island’s historicity legitimated the “quintessential” Coney Island experience by imbuing it with the prestige and authority of a longstanding tradition—of a historic tradition. It helped validate advocates’ claims about the value of the neighborhood. The perceived historical continuity of the crowds, exuberance, and transgression gave these qualities a sense of permanence. With regard to authenticity, we have seen that engaging in a local tradition made even spectacles that hewed closely to performance conventions seem more real than similar spectacles performed elsewhere, which come across as contrived imitations. A similar logic applied to a variety of amusement park features such as carnival food, concession signage, and barker ballies. Beyond the question of authenticity, advocates summoned historical precedent to equate Coney Island with diversity and with unconventional behavior, transforming these qualities into essential attributes of the neighborhood—attributes that made Coney Island “Coney Island” and without which it would have become a less remarkable beachside amusement park.

**Author:** There are many historic places. All places are historic in some dimension. What is it about this history?

**Interviewee:** I think there’s several things. There’s the fact that it’s a place that pioneered, and that originated many things that we today enjoy around the world, from arguably hotdogs, sort of roller coasters and enclosed amusement parks, etc., etc. And I think that the fact that it’s not just today a democratic space, but it has been for many decades a democratic public space. [It’s] also living history. It’s not an artifact. It’s a place that has continued to, in many ways, serve

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<sup>331</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2012.

some of the functions that it served historically. It fits into a narrative. And I think that I, by experiencing Coney Island's virtues today, my experience feels connected to past.<sup>332</sup>

By situating their local experiences within a tradition, advocates had come to view them as part of the histories that had helped define the image of Coney Island.

Finally, the perceived rarity of the Coney Island experience in contemporary New York City reinforced the feeling that this was a vestigial experience, something straight out of the neighborhood's storied past. While historical precedent anticipated and validated a particular experience of Coney Island, that experience also shaped and promoted a particular history. Advocates appreciated their visits not just on their own terms, but also because they offered something increasingly unavailable elsewhere in the city. In describing this contrast, they alluded to representations of old Coney Island, idealizing versions of its past and valorizing its remains. The perception of rarity commonly enhances the historic value of places. In the case of Coney Island, what advocates perceived as rare emerged in relation to a specific vision of contemporary life in New York City—a New York City that was ever less authentic, ever less diverse, and ever less extra-ordinary. As a result, advocate descriptions of Coney Island's historic character went beyond landmark structures and included seemingly ordinary features such as crowd diversity, hand painted signs, independently owned arcades, and eccentric personalities. These were features that, but for their perceived rarity, might have seemed unremarkable, but that in the context of present-day New York, evoked a bygone era.

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<sup>332</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

The advocates' accounts of the Coney Island experience and of local history reinforced each other. While the contrast between neighborhood features and life in New York City certified the district as historic, the local history informed visitors' expectations and authenticated their experiences. These dynamics helped shape the meaning and value that advocates attached to Coney Island. Present day New York provided the backdrop against which advocates' historical references came into relief. These references featured displays of authenticity: unique attractions by innovative impresarios; guerrilla art interventions during the gritty cultural ferment of the 1970s and 80s; and the neighborhood's preponderance of quirky characters. They highlighted large, diverse crowds and the accessible and affordable amusements at their disposal. And finally, they emphasized Coney Island's otherworldly elements: the splendor and topsy-turvy atmosphere of the original amusement parks, the transgressive acts of freaks and sideshow performers, and the freewheeling quality of the amusement district.

The historical picture of Coney Island that emerged from these narratives inverted the advocates' portrayals of contemporary New York, and especially of Manhattan. Against an open, affordable, classless, colorful, unpredictable, sensual, unique, and exotic Coney Island, they described a Manhattan (or a "Manhattanized city") that was enclosed, exclusive, stratified, staid and predictable—overrun with homogeneous types, generic glass and steel development, and chain retail.<sup>333</sup> Their idealized depictions of historic Coney Island served as a foil for contemporary New York and shed light on the types of experience that advocates still sought and occasionally encountered in Coney Island today.

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<sup>333</sup> Interviews with advocates, February 15, 2013; September 7, 2012; January 10, 2013; August 2, 2012; March 15, 2013.

The experiential dimensions highlighted by members of SCI all shared a common quality: a requisite level of engagement. Authenticity presented itself unpackaged, not in familiar formulas simplified for consumption. The appreciation of the essence that authentic displays seem to convey required an interpretive effort. In the face of an eccentric character, you couldn't fall back on conventional social expectations. In the face of a ruin, you had to squint to discern its former glory and envision its possibilities. Diversity in Coney Island did not consist solely of sitting back and admiring an unfolding display of difference. It often entailed an interaction with a variety of strangers and an opportunity for a more profound engagement with diversity than that available to people-watching flaneurs. Finally, the liberation from everyday life that Coney Island made possible did not consist solely of passive escapism. Local history invited active exploration. It rewarded a willingness to allow even the mundane to trigger flights of fancy and required an imaginative leap to bridge the space between the experience and the representation of place. The neighborhood also encouraged a suspension of everyday norms of behavior, prompting people to abandon the comforts of convention in order to gain perspectives precluded by social inhibitions.

The participatory aspect of Coney Island activities led advocates to forge a special attachment to the neighborhood. SCI's Coney Island was the result of years of exploration and interaction—the sort of engagement that places that try to manage visitor responses and package experiences attempt to control. Because of their past engagement, members of SCI considered themselves part of Coney Island. They felt like they had contributed to the neighborhood's historic narrative, leaving a

mark on something that had been there far longer than they had.<sup>334</sup> The relation between this narrative and Coney Island's features shaped advocates' views about preservation and development in the area and about what constituted neighborhood enhancements and neighborhood threats. The next SCI section discusses these views.

## E. SCI's Plan

The advocates' primary development goals were to preserve and promote Coney Island's function as a historic beachfront amusement area. At a most basic level, this meant support for the expansion or enhancement of amusement uses and opposition to development that undermined them. But it did not entail an unqualified endorsement of any additional amusement rides. SCI members endorsed forms of development (including amusement rides) that would preserve and promote neighborhood qualities that made possible the image and experience of iconic Coney Island—an experience of authenticity, diversity, transgression, and escape, colored by a historic legacy. This section first identifies these neighborhood qualities as they inhered in the built and non-built environment. It then discusses how advocates would have managed those qualities in the face of change, addressing their views on both preservation and new development. We begin by establishing the concrete (though not necessarily physical) neighborhood elements that undergird Coney Island's iconicity.

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<sup>334</sup> Interview with advocate, August 8, 2012.

### Vestigial Remains

Advocates related the image and experience of Coney Island to some of its older structures, especially its historic landmarks. Landmarks like the Parachute Jump and the Wonder Wheel served as signposts for collective memories of the area and perpetuated the district's identity as a historic amusement destination. Their evocation of famous representations of the neighborhood reinforced the neighborhood's unique image and made possible the engaged and embodied experience of history that advocates felt distinguishes Coney Island from other amusement areas. While not as emblematic and immediately recognizable as landmarks, less famous older structures also contributed to the district's historicity.

Interviewee: I feel that magic feeling of a place that used to exist, I think it's still palpable there, and I think people got that from it.

Author: And where do you think that sense of this place that used to exist gets reflected in your current day experience?

Interviewee: I think in the structure of some of the buildings. The old Shore Theater, the old bank building, definitely even the building with the freak show and the museum. I liked going to the museum and seeing the old artifacts from rides. And some of the boardwalk businesses that have been there forever, I think you definitely get that impression.<sup>335</sup>

The outdated architectural styles and the weathered physical condition of older buildings and rides offered tactile accounts of the neighborhood's past. Layers of deliberate and unintended changes to each structure told distinct stories and prompted exploration.

Old structures set Coney Island apart from its contemporary surroundings not just in relation to the neighborhood's outsized history, but also through their formal distinctiveness. Some stood out, individually or as part of the landscape they

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<sup>335</sup> Interview with advocate, August 8, 2012.

collectively formed, for their playful and idiosyncratic design. Others did through displays, signage, or design elements, such as fixtures or materials. Vintage ketchup dispensers, classic slides, traditional candy apple displays, and old wooden bar tops all drew attention both by association and through the unusual quality of their design.

I love the old feeling of [Ruby's], when you could walk in there and smell wood, see all the photographs. It had character. You know, I mean by character, it feels like you're going into some place where Weegee could be sitting at the bar with you. You could close your eyes and feel Weegee's spirit sitting there; you could feel the spirit of something just sitting there with you.<sup>336</sup>

Author: So what is it about these handcrafted rides? What is it about the hand-craftiness that makes it more desirable?

Interviewee: Things like that do not escape people's attention. I don't care how dumb they are to aesthetics or architecture or anything else, but I think that kind of thing really has an effect on people. Take for example the Panama Slide, built out of hard maple, strips of hard maple. Yes, it's expensive, and God knows the craftsmanship is unbelievable. Now they put up a trailer mounted plastic thing that has seams in the thing. It's just a different experience. I think that people, even if they don't know it, they sense it. I would characterize the difference as providing something that has a quality, a finesse, and an aestheticism that goes beyond economics.<sup>337</sup>

Even minor elements of old structures had the capacity to reinforce Coney Island's iconicity in several ways. Old hand-painted signs offer an apt illustration. In frequent mentions by members of SCI, their whimsical and singular designs enlivened and added variety to the streetscape. They both conformed to a tradition—one associated with carnival attractions—and reflected an artist's individual sensibilities. Their physical condition and anachronistic aesthetic distinguished them from contemporary signage and evoked local history. In all, old-fashioned signage, along with the older structures they adorned, echoed iconic

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<sup>336</sup> Interview with advocate, March 15, 2013.

<sup>337</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

representations of the neighborhood and contributed to the variegated, authentic, and liminal experience that advocates sought in Coney Island.

### **Urban Design**

Certain physical features that advocates associated with local iconicity inhered not in individual structures but in the urban design of the neighborhood. Perhaps the most notable of these was the district's sense of openness, which complemented the amusement area's accessibility and affordability—essential attributes in their own right—to affirm Coney Island's status as the "people's playground."

It's a huge outdoor recreational area for everybody in the city as affordable. It's an icon. It's historic. We need to preserve this and build upon it.<sup>338</sup>

The neighborhood's openness put on display local attractions, vendors, performers, and crowds, allowing visitors to explore aimlessly and enjoy at no cost the carnivalesque intensity of the district. It effaced the boundaries between beach, boardwalk, amusements, and city, making each visible and accessible from the others and thereby enabling each to inform the character of the rest.

The visibility of the district's diverse crowds at play attracted a variety of artistic or political public performances and displays, giving rise to a virtuous cycle: a public looking for spectacles and spectacles looking for a public. As this dynamic unfolded out in the open, it fostered a sense that this is a venue not just for consumption, but also for creative expression.

Interviewee: The day of the marriage thing [when New York State legalized same-sex marriage], there was all of these, you could tell that they

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<sup>338</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

were people who were of lower income status, of middle income status, who were same sex families crawling out of the woodwork.

**Author:** Why do you think they chose Coney Island?

**Interviewee:** I think that of a certain class of people, it's still somewhere you can afford to take the kid, instead of driving to wherever. I think it being outdoors is crucially important here, too. So if I were to step back and analyze it a bit more now, there was something very public about this display of same-sex couples in Coney Island on that day, and the fact that it was right outside, in the open, is a part of that. But that's a part of a lot of the great enjoyments left there, whether it's about people being on display, or experiences. There are very few places in New York that offer an outdoors anything, let alone that feeling of just roaming through a funhouse, that you get at Coney Island.<sup>339</sup>

Outdoor performances, demonstrations, and displays encouraged more of the same, reinforcing the neighborhood's reputation for welcoming all manner of public presentation. They also supplemented the pervasive activity that already surrounded rides, games, and vendors, engendering a bustling atmosphere throughout the district—an immersive and public carnival of sights, sounds, and smells that was far removed from everyday city life.

### Maintenance and Services

Members of SCI had given little thought to development in the area until the City announced its planning initiative. They had also, however, seen little need for it, having been perfectly happy with Coney Island as they had come to know it. As they viewed things, the main problems with the amusement district had to do with deficiencies in city services, not with lack of development.

I think one of the first things I would do would have been very simple. I would have repaired the boardwalk. I would have had garbage pickup come more frequently. I would have cleaned the beaches more frequently. I would have given the Boardwalk and the community the tools that they needed to operate as a seaside resort, to deal with the amounts of people that were there. To ensure their safety. Just the usability of the space. Those would

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<sup>339</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2012.

have been the first things I would have done. The Boardwalk; that would have been a safety issue. The Boardwalk had gaping holes in it. The garbage would be overflowing, because nobody picked it up.<sup>340</sup>

Beyond maintenance issues, advocates also stressed the need for simple enhancements for visitors, such as more public bathrooms, better signage offering directions, and the replacement of temporary infrastructure like chain linked fencing. When confronted, however, with the prospect of development, they put service and maintenance issues aside and prioritized the preservation of existing neighborhood features, giving especial emphasis to those that new development might put at risk.

### **Historic Preservation**

Advocates called for landmark designation and protection of all non-landmarked buildings that dated back to the amusement area's early decades. These included primarily those along Surf Avenue: the Shore Theater, the Shore Hotel, Henderson's Music Hall, the Bank of Coney Island, Nathan's Famous, and the Grashorn. The preservation of old structures got special attention due to the long history of local landmarks lost or almost lost because of past redevelopment projects. A few advocates remembered the demolition of Steeplechase Pavilion. Several not old enough to remember it still remembered the demolition of the Thunderbolt. And those who did not remember either still agreed that so little remained of Coney Island's historic infrastructure that further demolitions might deprive the area of the critical mass necessary to link it symbolically and aesthetically to the past.

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<sup>340</sup> Interview with advocate, September 7, 2013.

SCI members also insisted on the retention of longstanding, small, independent businesses, such as Ruby's Bar and Grill and Paul's Daughter, which they regarded as integral contributors to Coney Island's sense of place. These establishments bore the marks of thousands of past patrons. Their physical artifacts had sedimented into a sort of historic mosaic. Their regulars and employees could seem like straight out of Coney Island's heyday. Their owners were well acquainted with local history and likely to share a story or two. Their operation and appearance conformed to local tradition, while at the same time reflecting the personal idiosyncrasies of the management. And finally, having long been part of the freewheeling scene, they tolerated and even welcomed eccentricities that would have been unacceptable elsewhere.

The advocates' emphasis on preservation stemmed from concerns not just over what might be lost, but also over what might take its place. The uniqueness, aesthetic value, and historical associations of older establishments and structures might give way to the sort of banal and cheap construction that has degraded local distinctiveness throughout the city.

Author: What about the Bank [of Coney Island]? What did you like about that one?

Interviewee: Just the architecture inside. You don't see buildings like that any more. New buildings being built, they all look the same to me.

Author: Can you give me examples?

Interviewee: Well most places. Look around Manhattan. Almost every time I see a new building, I'm like "ugh...". Like the one in Cooper Union, almost everything...

Author: What about the Grashorn, do you care about that?

Interviewee: Yeah! Any historic building that is a link to the old Coney Island.

Author: So it's not so much about the architecture as about the link.

Interviewee: It's both because, I mean, any building that replaces it is going to be just generic.<sup>341</sup>

The precedence of preservation and suspicion of new development reflected a clear stance regarding existing conditions in Coney Island, but offered little guidance for the management of change in the amusement district. Advocates called for new affordable, open-air amusements. Did that mean that any such development would have been acceptable? The SCI priorities left unanswered questions not only about the form and uses of new construction, but also about the preservation and reuse of existing structures. Advocates prized an eclectic, layered, and distressed aesthetic that resulted from decades of often unplanned and uncoordinated alterations by man and nature—an aesthetic that cannot be easily faked. They also made paradoxical demands for historic integrity and continuity in an amusement area long characterized by season-by-season transformations and reinventions. Historically, Coney Island's attractions changed regularly, much like its structures, as businesses sought to keep things fresh and interesting for visitors from season to season. So what constituted for members of SCI historical integrity in light of this history of flux and constant renewal?

### **New Development**

Members of SCI recognized the tension between tradition and change. Mindful of the risk of keeping the amusement area frozen in time, they recommend bringing in not only old-fashioned rides that they believed still held widespread appeal, but also contemporary versions of once successful but now outdated historic attractions. They seldom, however, proposed the reconstruction of former rides or buildings, and when they did—as with the reconstruction of Steeplechase Pavilion—it was

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<sup>341</sup> Interview with advocate, February 15, 2013.

less for nostalgic reasons than for the type of the experience they might provide. Their reconstruction proposals and their ideas for new development shared several features:

- an integration of indoor and outdoor spaces, bringing together incongruous activities and offering unexpected vistas;

At Feldman's they would have found an incredibly great and bizarre restaurant with maple trees growing up through the dining room. They would have found a carousel; they would have found that indoor-outdoor experience going on. In Bradley beach, there's this great restaurant, the sort of gentle curves of the woodwork and so forth are all done in white incandescent bulbs, and it took my breath away to see that. I want to see that kind of thing again.<sup>342</sup>

- a surreal juxtaposition of carnival and everyday;

There had been photos I had seen maybe before I lived here that showed a roller coaster going over businesses. That was something they could have in the new incarnation that would have at least appeased me. I just thought it was so cool that there would be a roller coaster going over a lot of little storefronts. Like, have this gigantic thing. If you need businesses, have the businesses, and put the coaster on top.<sup>343</sup>

- an emphasis on public access, visibility, and participation;

Interviewee: I would really like to have seen a plan for an indoor-outdoor all-season amusement pavilion and grounds. It did not have to be slavish to the original, but it had to nod to the original [Steeplechase Pavilion].

Author: Why that?

Interviewee: Just because. How do you like that? Just because it was.... Why would you rebuild Penn Station?

Author: I don't know. Why would you rebuild Penn Station?

Interviewee: Because it was a grand, fabulous public space.

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<sup>342</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

<sup>343</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

- and the cultivation of an immersive and fantastical atmosphere.

Interviewee: I would rebuild a type of a Steeplechase Park. Yeah. A glass enclosed pavilion with rides inside.

Author: Why?

Interviewee: Because it was gorgeous. You know it's lit up at night, it's magical.

Author: What makes it magical?

Interviewee: Probably the aesthetic of the structure, you know when it's lit up at night, you know, there's all the lights and you can see the stained glass doors; you see the George Tilyou face smiling in the dark. It's just beautiful, it's like a Fellini you know. Over the top.<sup>344</sup>

Other advocate proposals reflected a similar emphasis on the playful transgression of boundaries, the centrality of the public, and the reinvention of the traditional: spooky boat rides through the foundations of reimagined haunted houses; an interactive New York City Transit graffiti museum; an adult-oriented circus; a street skate park, etc. More generally, the group's diverse development ideas demonstrated an interest in innovative and unusual attractions as well as a conviction that the enemy of historic Coney Island was not so much the new as the banal.

### **Implementation**

Members of SCI found that the success of new development and preservation efforts hinged, not just on the type of use, but on the artfulness of execution. They subscribed to flexible views of historical authenticity and cited approvingly the use of archival displays, neo-traditional signage, and even replicas, but only when deployed tastefully.

Interviewee: A place like Disneyland or Disney World unfailingly have a "ye olde blah blah blah" component to them.

Author: But you mock that?

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<sup>344</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

Interviewee: Yes I do. I do. That's because they say, "Ye Olde thingamajiggy." But the drive or the instinct to do something that is redolent of the past or evokes the past must mean something to people.

Author: What is the difference between barbershop quartet [outfits] and the outfits that [Richard Eagan] and Dick [Zigun] wore when fixing up that ride?

Interviewee: Not much. [They] brought back some humor and some style. There was the matter of bringing style to what [they were] doing. [They] wanted to have style, and it was a style to evoke the past, and it was actually sort of up to date, in a way.<sup>345</sup>

Interviewee: I hate that stupid pointy thing with the lights on it [in the restoration of Stillwell Station].

Author: With the ball on the top?

Interviewee: Yeah. It's just such a bad imitation of Luna Park.

Author: I thought you liked fanciful architecture.

Interviewee: I know, but that's not fanci.... that looks like, fuckin', some cheesy mall somewhere. Just the fabrication on it. I don't like the execution of the detail. But otherwise I do like it. I feel like that detail in particular, and the lettering of Coney Island over the entranceway, is just really badly executed. That's the one detail I can't stand on that thing. I would have loved to see just a cooler tower on the subway station that was just more channeling Luna Park, more true to Luna Park.<sup>346</sup>

Although advocates had definite ideas about the type of new development that would enhance iconic Coney Island and about the quality of its execution, they shied away from putting forward a development plan for the district, claiming that they were not planners. Instead, they proposed two seemingly contradictory development principles as ways to encourage the right kind of attraction and its proper implementation: dream big and act small.

### *Acting Small*

Acting small referred to a moderate, incremental, fine-grained approach to development. It eschewed large, sexy interventions and big-dollar projects in favor

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<sup>345</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

<sup>346</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2013.

of small-scale improvements. Rather than overhaul large portions of a neighborhood, this strategy integrated new development with the old. In proposing this approach, advocates envisioned a fragmentary landscape consisting of many independent businesses—the model that had prevailed in Coney Island throughout its amusement history. They endorsed this approach first of all because its piecemeal nature seemed most compatible with their preservation priorities, but also because they sensed that independent owners have a greater personal stake in the success of the neighborhood—an intuitive impression that was reinforced by the visible involvement of owners in their establishments and in local affairs. Advocates also associated independent businesses with a greater degree of flexibility. Relative to chain stores and corporate operations, independent owners appear to have greater room to experiment and respond to their unique surroundings and to the local clientele. This likely resulted in a greater willingness to tolerate and even welcome the quirks of Coney Island patrons. It also seemed to bring about attractions and businesses that reflected the owner's individuality.

Members of SCI also favored a fragmentary development approach for the greater business diversity it produced. From the businesses' perspective, they found that diversity increased synergies within the district, allowing owners a greater chance to benefit and learn from each other's success. From the visitor's perspective, advocates believed that a greater number of independent operations created a more unique and lively retail and amusement experience, while also fostering greater innovation as part of the competition for customers and the innovative strategies that that entails.

Interviewee: I think if they were able to fill out the neighborhood a little more. It would be nice to do it in such a way that it could encourage small businesses. It's not all concessions under one owner. I think that would be something I would want to encourage.

Author: Why is that important?

Interviewee: Cause it's about diversity. You don't want that every concession is just the same [amusement park's] t-shirts. You want to just have diversity. I think, actually, the old model was better where each ride was its own, or you might have someone who has a couple rides. I think that was better, ultimately. And it actually puts a better focus on quality. If I only have one ride, and I live or die by how well my ride does, I have more attention on whether it's a good experience or not. If [one amusement park] runs everything and that ride there sucks, I don't care cause it's all a wash in the end<sup>347</sup>

In sum, acting small stemmed from a sense that a multiplicity of independent businesses would produce a more dynamic, exciting, and resilient amusement district—one in which owners are personally invested in the development of their shops and of the neighborhood. It also originated from a desire to avoid the formulas that characterize large commercial districts prevalent throughout the city—formulas that rely on chain retail and corporate operations. Advocates argued that this sort of development would undermine the appeal of Coney Island by limiting its offerings to something widely and increasingly available everywhere.

I think it dilutes the spirit, and it dilutes the individuality. I travel a lot, and it's like pretty much every city you go to is the same these days. There's a Panera, there's a Starbucks, there's a Dunkin' Donuts. There's a Target, there's a Walmart. It obviously happened so much with the Bloomberg administration period in NY. Like in Manhattan. I just think there should be some rule, where you can't have these big businesses come in there and put up these shops. It does put a damper on the mom and pop businesses, and it's just lame. It's not individual to a place that is known for its individuality and its crossroads of cultures.<sup>348</sup>

The kind of thing that Joe Sitt reads as a litany of people who want into the new Coney Island. And it's this, that, and the other one. And I think, "Oh great, where are we, Queens?" It's so, you want to turn into a generic chain store mall, basically. Look, I am annoyed that there is a Duane Reade and a

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<sup>347</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2013.

<sup>348</sup> Interview with advocate, September 7, 2012.

Victoria's Secret every five blocks in Manhattan. You don't go to a neighborhood to get the thing you need anymore, because you have it there now. You don't have to go anywhere. And I find that numbing. And it also squeezes out the unique. And that's why I don't like the notion of chain establishments in Coney Island. It's like walking through an airport. You can be anyplace.<sup>349</sup>

### *Dreaming Big*

The second development principle advanced by members of SCI—dream big—was inspired by the larger-than-life showmen and attractions that once captivated Coney Island visitors. Advocates shared a strong view that the area's history and vestiges provided a solid foundation upon which to embark on ambitious experiments in amusing the masses.

I wasn't thinking, "Oh, this is run down." Or how to make it better. It had a kind of interesting texture to it, because of that. And so, again, I was kind of like, "Wow, this is a place where things can happen." Coney Island struck me as place where things could.... It was kind of open, things could happen. I could imagine doing things there.<sup>350</sup>

SCI's ideas for restoring the amusement area's epic grandeur borrowed from the old amusement parks in terms of both attractions and urban design. The advocates recommended, for example, the widespread adoption of Luna Park's extravagant aesthetic<sup>351</sup> and the removal of KeySpan Park so as to restore the grand scale of a continuous amusement area visually connected to the Boardwalk and the beach.<sup>352</sup> They also called for design interventions, such as majestic gateways, that might better define sightlines.

Think about that subway ride as you enter in on the D line or whatever from West 8th through Stillwell. Instead of having this great view of the

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<sup>349</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

<sup>350</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2012.

<sup>351</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2013.

<sup>352</sup> Interview with advocate, August 15, 2012.

Wonder Wheel... You know, [the City has] never done a good job at ... if you think about how you enter another amusement area like Disney, it's all about these set-up vistas. They could do so much with the Cropsy Avenue entrance into Coney Island. And having signage or something, instead of being like a junkyard. You also want to have these nice sightlines. It would be nice to have an arch over the street that's like, "Welcome to Coney Island," as you drive in from Cropsy Avenue over the bridge. And you certainly do want someone coming in on the subway to be excited about it and see the Astrotower lit up and the Wonder Wheel turning.<sup>353</sup>

Beyond design measures, the group members suggested a variety of epic rides and structures: roller coasters integrated into the streetscape; a modern Elephant hotel; and reconstructions of the Steeplechase Pavilion and of the Thunderbolt. In most cases, however, they offered their examples less as concrete proposals than as sources of inspiration. They described, for instance, the merits of using historical references to evoke representations of old Coney Island and pointed to Horace Bullard's unrealized development plan—which emulated historic parks in scale, design, and attractions—as a commendable illustration of this approach. But they presented this example less as a template to follow than as source material that might offer guidance in the development of a project of a scale commensurate with Coney Island's iconic image.

### *"Inside" vs "Outside"*

SCI's development recommendations can seem at odds with one another, wavering as they do between the assertiveness of grand structures and the restraint of incrementalism. Advocates, though, did not view this as a contradiction. For one, they felt the district had room enough to accommodate both forms of development. Secondly, they viewed both approaches as complementary ways to build on Coney Island's iconic identity. Their ability to do so hinged not on scale, but on sensitivity

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<sup>353</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2013.

to the neighborhood's particularity. Observing this distinction, advocates differentiated "organic" development that built on tradition from "outside" development that threatened to overwhelm it.

It really, to me, felt like I was seeing some kind of cohesion to the place that felt organic and real. It didn't seem like it was imposed by an outside force.<sup>354</sup>

"Organic" here denoted development that, unlike outside formulas, recognized local traditions and responded to them. It did not, however, imply a categorical repudiation of outsiders. At some point or other, just about every Coney Island impresario had arrived from elsewhere. What set desirable outsiders apart from undesirable ones was a capacity and willingness to engage the neighborhood's complexity. By allowing that complexity to inform their work, outsiders gradually become insiders in their own right. Such had been the case with two entrepreneurs singled out by members of SCI for their contributions to the amusement area: Dick Zigun and Dianna Carlin.

Zigun, who arrived in Coney Island inspired by a play set in the neighborhood, had started out with modest theatrical ambitions. Through trial and error, however, he ended up leading an arts organization and developing an aesthetic and a full program of events heavily influenced by local history. His organization's Mermaid Parade has become the largest arts parade in the country and the most popular day of the year in Coney Island. Zigun's efforts have also led to a more general resurgence in Coney Island's popularity. He has helped disseminate what he calls a "honky-tonk chic" sensibility—an appreciation of the convergence of glamour and

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<sup>354</sup> Interview with advocate, August 3, 2012.

grit that had historically defined the amusement area. By re-imagining the neighborhood, CI USA has made it attractive to an entirely new audience and has helped performers, merchants, and other impresarios draw inspiration, like Ziguin has, from visions of Coney Island's evocative past.

Carlin, for her part, had started out designing Coney Island-themed t-shirts and selling them through retailers. She eventually opened her own store on the Boardwalk. While that remained a largely self-operated, small-scale affair, employing no more than one or two people during high season, it became a successful and highly visible platform for her creative efforts. In 2007, she dreamed up another, more ambitious venture: a Coney Island-themed roller rink. Carlin lacked a venue, funding, and experience running this kind of operation. But she had a concept and a name—the Dreamland Roller Rink. That year, she had come across a contest sponsored by Glamour Magazine and Tommy Hilfiger called Dreaming, a contest about making dreams come true. She entered her roller rink idea and won. It got her neither money nor a venue; but it did get her publicity and an introduction to Taconic, the developer that had begun to purchase land west of KeySpan Park in anticipation of the City's rezoning. Carlin asked Taconic to grant her use of one of its properties—the Child's building—for her skating rink. Since the developer had no plans for the vacant site prior to the rezoning, it agreed.

Dreamland Roller Rink opened its doors late in the summer of 2008, adding a surreal touch of glitz to an otherwise deserted stretch of the Boardwalk. During hours of operation, the old Childs Restaurant could now be spotted from a distance, past vacant blocks, alit in a pink glow that pulsated from within. The

building's dilapidated maritime-themed exterior framed colorful, kinetic scenes visible from the Boardwalk past its arches. Themed parties drew a mixed crowd of often costumed revelers. Although the venue never operated profitably, it proved a great success in terms of attendance, the publicity it generated, and the experience it afforded Carlin for future ventures.

In terms of development, Carlin's ventures brought to the Boardwalk a re-imagining of Coney Island imbued with local lore and refracted through her personal sensibilities. Through her designs, she promoted this vision far beyond the neighborhood and even beyond the City, enhancing Coney Island's appeal as a historic destination. She also breathed new life into neglected corners of the amusement district, bringing attention to the area's development potential.

Both Zigun and Carlin had settled in Coney Island inspired by the experience and the image of the amusement area—by its history, its colors, its contrasts, its people. They had crafted their visions of the place into original designs and spectacles. Their various efforts promoted types of images and experiences valued by advocates. At once original, traditional, and occasionally unconventional, the burlesque revues and Carlin's designs came across as authentic and as true to the neighborhood. The Sideshow and Carlin's themed parties provided the thrill of the unexpected and evoked a different time and place. The Mermaid Parade and Dreamland Roller Rink celebrated local diversity and put it on display.

It was hysterical when I went [to Dreamland Roller Rink]. You go, you strap on skates, and you're like with the most random people in the world that would want to do that. People are freaking out just to stand up, screaming and shrieking, that's the kind of thing. But you need that, not a Chelsea Piers version of that; you need the Coney Island version of that. I

think Lola was sort of getting at that. You walk out and you see the water, so one level is landscape. But I think another level was that it was affordable enough that there were all these random mother-daughter pairs. It was really a pretty random activity to be engaged in. I guess the difference is just a question of audience.<sup>355</sup>

Beyond reinforcing the notion of iconic Coney Island, Ziguin and Carlin had also abided by the two development principles endorsed by advocates. On the one hand, they had started small, producing work inspired by their context and responsive to it. They had tested the waters to determine what would appeal to local crowds and how to integrate themselves into the existing commercial landscape. Because of their size and flexibility, they had been able to adapt their work in response to a series of minor failures and lessons learned. Thanks to this responsiveness, they had eventually succeeded in developing products that not only catered to existing customers and audiences, but also attracted new ones. Because their work felt at once innovative and true to the place, it struck members of SCI as appropriate to the neighborhood and as a continuation of its commercial and artistic tradition. It engaged with local tradition, at once perpetuating it and helping to shape it.

[Ziguin] always wanted to have a sideshow, for example, that did not refer to a sideshow, but that was a sideshow. And he has it. It's changed over the years, but it's also remained the same. It's one of the true, authentic, old-line things about Coney Island. It may be wearing hipster clothing. But it's doing the same thing, providing titillating, bizarre, unusual behavior.<sup>356</sup>

On the other hand, Ziguin and Carlin had dreamt big, pursuing their visions far beyond their initial footprint. The immersive spaces they created may not have been at the scale of the extravagant alternative worlds of the turn of the century parks, but their work had nonetheless helped inflect visitors' experience with

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<sup>355</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2012.

<sup>356</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

particular perspectives on Coney Island. Carlin had steeped images of local icons with a sort of pink flapper glamour and propagated that vision through her events and merchandise. Zigun had aestheticized local history, packaging the luridness and eroticism of the Nickel Empire with post-modern self-awareness. This had helped spawn an arts organization, an entertainment scene, and a generation of performers who made that aesthetic their own and popularized it well beyond Coney Island.

### *Implementing Diversified Incrementalism*

Members of SCI argued that a reliance on small entrepreneurs as a development strategy had the advantage of diversified incrementalism. Expansion proceeded tentatively, depending on the success of a variety of businesses and not on the fortunes of any single one of them. The examples of Zigun and Carlin showed off this approach in an especially good light, highlighting the efforts of artists well attuned to the rich history of the neighborhood. Those efforts, however, depended on the talents of particular individuals, a contingency that illustrated the limitations of this approach as a development strategy.

Bring back some of the handcrafted mom and pop stores that you still see in Jones Walk. Lola Staar's boutique on the Boardwalk is awesome. It's hers, it's unique, it's great stuff. It's unique to Coney Island. It's someone who really loves Coney Island. As a developer you may have a plan for an area, but you can't create those people. You can set up a situation where hopefully those people will take root, but you can't be like, "OK, and now we're going to have Lola Staar here." Or somebody who's like Lola Staar.<sup>357</sup>

As this advocate recognized, you cannot summon an army of Ziguns and Carlins (nor, if you value business diversity, would you want to). Mindful of this limitation, some SCI members offered an alternative way of imbuing new development with a

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<sup>357</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2012.

traditional sensibility: committees of local experts. These committees would propose and guide new development efforts.

I would have people who are passionate about the history of Coney Island help design [historic references and restorations]. There's plenty of artists with the skills necessary to put it in place.<sup>358</sup>

I would put together a team of people who love Coney just as much as me, but knew more than me. I would just assemble a team. I think one person thinking they have the answers is really wrong way to go.<sup>359</sup>

The idea of outside development ceding control to local “experts” might seem far-fetched, but it had a precedent in Coney Island.

In 2004, artist Steve Powers went down to Coney Island in search of inspiration from local signage and was dismayed to discover much of it in a state of disrepair (Vogel 2004). He volunteered to paint new signs for some of the businesses. Although he was initially turned down, once the first business accepted, others quickly followed suit. Encouraged, he approached Creative Time, a non-profit organization that commissions public art, and pitched the project to its director, who readily took an interest. Together, they launched the “Dreamland Artist Club,” retaining two dozen up-and-coming artists with “a personal, social, or aesthetic interest in the visual culture”<sup>360</sup> of Coney Island to paint on a volunteer basis rides, signs, murals, and scenic backdrops for local businesses and attractions and to help celebrate, in Powers words, the “grimy, hustling and bustling” quality of the district (Vogel 2004).

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<sup>358</sup> Interview with advocate, February 28, 2013.

<sup>359</sup> Interview with advocate, July 17, 2013.

<sup>360</sup> Creative Time, Dreamland Artists Club: <http://creativetime.org/projects/the-dreamland-artist-club-2005/>

Powers asked Zigun to introduce him to local business owners so that he could then pair those interested in the project with participating artists. The production of the artwork followed the business owners' specifications and resulted in faithful reproductions or reinterpretations of traditional signage. In the end, some owners were thrilled with the results. Others were indifferent (Kennedy 2005) and somewhat skeptical of the process ("I don't know about all this 'professional' stuff. If he's so professional, why does he take three whole hours just to paint one letter?" [Taylor 2004]). But the price pleased everyone, and the project continued for at least one additional season. Members of SCI came to regard the artists' handiwork as a great success, at once original, exciting, and consistent with the local character of the neighborhood.<sup>361</sup> The initiative illustrates how outsiders, in collaboration with local "experts," can assimilate local peculiarities and create an illusion of "organic development" to the satisfaction of even those especially sensitive to its nuances.

The advocates' endorsement of projects like the Dreamland Artist Club showed their insider/outsider distinction to be less about place of origin than about an appreciation of Coney Island's iconic identity. When it came to development, members of SCI conferred insider status to those responsive to cultural context. As the planning process progressed and the prospect of non-responsive development loomed large, they increasingly relied on the insider/outsider binary to distinguish those who cared about Coney Island from those only interested in making a quick buck.

What I [would] do is get a community of people that are into the arts and amusement people to sit there and discuss what would have been the best way to use the property, not to turn it around and find a developer who's

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<sup>361</sup> Interviews with advocates, October 17, 2012; July 11, 2013; August 3, 2012.

got the most money to pay off the politicians and buy the property to ridiculous amounts of money and sit there and say okay, you can do what you like. Like I said, I believe Coney Island should not be about dollars.<sup>362</sup>

The objection to profit as a primary development motivation did not reflect a categorical disapproval of commercial enterprise as much as an insistence on a thoughtful engagement with local tradition. This tradition had been, to be sure, a commercial one defined in part by innovations in the commodification of leisure. But it had been a discerning commodification—one that had allowed forms of recreation particular to Coney Island to thrive. In the end, then, members of SCI did not so much oppose new development as limit their approval to projects that might support, prolong, and enhance the qualities—including the commercial qualities—that rendered, in their mind, the image and the experience of Coney Island iconic.

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<sup>362</sup> Interview with advocate, June 15, 2013.

## XIV. Chronicle (Part III)

### MAS Panel

Coney Island's renown and the controversies surrounding its redevelopment drew increasing attention in planning circles with each new headline. The Municipal Art Society (MAS), the oldest and largest planning and preservation advocacy organization in New York City, had taken an interest in the project months before the City had even changed its plan.<sup>363</sup> MAS hosted its first public forum on the matter on September 17, when tempers in Coney Island were still flaring from the closure of Astroland a few days prior.

The panelists for the sold out event included Albert, Zigun, Kapur, and Kelly, none of whom took long to start trading recriminations. Zigun called the revised plan an insult to the amusement industry and questioned the administration's integrity, asking how the City could dismiss as "unrealistic" a plan that it had itself formulated and endorsed a few months before. Albert challenged Kelly's attempt to give the City credit for its efforts to save Astroland, pointing to the Administration's yearlong indifference toward the expansion plans she had circulated while still in possession of the Astroland site. Ignoring the accusations levied against the City, Kelly defended the rezoning as the only way to save local amusements. She offered the non-conforming uses along the north side of Surf Avenue as proof of the C7 zoning's ineffectiveness. Her choice of evidence, however, backfired when others pushed her to explain why the City did not enforce its own zoning regulations (Robau 2008o).

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<sup>363</sup> Municipal Arts Society, "Coney Island One Page Memo" (Internal document). February 6, 2008.

Sitt, who chose to skip the contentious event, was nonetheless caught in the week's crossfire. The day after the forum, Kelly called his rides a big flop and a deliberate attempt to demonstrate the unviability of amusements in Coney Island in order to obtain favorable zoning modifications in the future (Calder 2008h).

### A Changing Landscape

As the standoff between Sitt and the City dragged on, several developments transformed their negotiating ground. First, the local real estate market, which had been cooling off all year because of a nationwide credit crunch, ground to a halt in the fall of 2008 (Geller 2008; Bagli 2008b). This both complicated the City's ability to find a suitable developer for its amusement park and limited Thor's ability to sell his land. Second, the City purchased part of the Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park site for \$11 million after Thor allowed its \$11m option on it to lapse (Calder 2008i). The acquisition of the one-acre site, which was flanked on both sides by Thor property, dashed the developer's hopes of controlling the continuous stretch of land necessary to carry out its plan. Finally, the Mayor lobbied City Council to repeal the two-term limit that had been approved by popular vote in 1993 and again in 1996, arguing that the economic circumstances required the leadership of a financial expert like himself. The Council, led by a Bloomberg ally, Speaker Quinn, approved a term limit amendment by a narrow margin, allowing the Mayor to run for a third term. A Bloomberg reelection would increase Thor's cost of waiting until the next administration to obtain zoning relief.

The combination of these events should have increased the City's bargaining leverage and Thor's sense of urgency. Neither side, however, seemed in a hurry to resume negotiations.

### **“Imagine Coney”**

MAS had harbored concerns about the City's plans even before the zoning revisions. For the scoping session, it produced seventeen pages of comments requesting that the City study the impact of the proposed plan on business diversity and historic structures and walks, as well as the adequacy of the amount of land allocated to outdoor amusements.<sup>364</sup> It also called for the evaluation of alternative development scenarios with vastly expanded amusement areas, multiple owners and operators, and incentives for local and independent businesses.

MAS then launched an initiative called “Imagine Coney,” which aimed to influence the City by generating a better vision for the neighborhood’s redevelopment. This effort included two major components, a web-based call for ideas targeting the broader public and a visioning exercise by a team of amusement, design, and development experts (Brown 2008b). Hoping to produce results before the City finalized its recommendations for ULURP, MAS imposed an expedited schedule on the exercise. Within a span of three weeks, the team would hold a listening session with Coney Island stakeholders and city officials, run two public brainstorming workshops, conduct a charrette, and present its results.

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<sup>364</sup> Municipal Arts Society. “Comments on the Revised Draft Scope of Analysis for Coney Island Rezoning Project EIS. June 2008.

The City participated in the listening session that launched the MAS visioning exercise. It also made clear, however, that it would not reconsider its zoning recommendations because it did not want to jeopardize the project's timeline. Planning Commissioner Amanda Burden claimed that any delays would imperil Coney Island's existence and further justified the City's intransigence by pointing to the "scores of meetings [already held] with a wide variety of local and citywide stakeholders" (Brown 2008c). She did not, however, explain why the City had retreated from the recommendations that came out of those meetings.

Despite Burden's admonitions, "Imagine Coney" proceeded and was soon joined by another effort similarly premised on a sense that the City's plan could benefit from fresh ideas and that "it [was] not too late for a new vision for [the neighborhood] to emerge."<sup>365</sup> Center for an Urban Future (CUF), the local think tank whose director had moderated the MAS roundtable, produced a report that added twenty-three additional proposals to the mix. The document aggregated interviews of individuals from assorted backgrounds whose work had some relevance to the Coney Island project. Interviewees included accomplished novelists, historians, planners, developers, sociologists, designers, architecture critics, entrepreneurs, anthropologists, and local business owners.<sup>366</sup> Their responses ranged widely,

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<sup>365</sup> Center for an Urban Future, "Coney Island Visions." November 2008

<sup>366</sup> CUF interviewed the following individuals:

- Jonathan Lethem, author, *Motherless Brooklyn* and *The Fortress of Solitude*;
- Eric Zimmerman, founder of video game development company Gamelab;
- Alexander Garvin, president and CEO, Alex Garvin & Associates, a New York-based urban planning firm;
- Mike Wallace, author of *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*;
- Michael Immerso, author, *Coney Island: The People's Playground*;
- Lars Liebst, CEO, Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens, the second oldest amusement park in the world;
- Irwin Cohen, developer of the Chelsea Market;
- Dianna Carlin, founder of Lola Staar souvenir boutique and Dreamland roller rink;
- Lisa Chamberlain, executive director, Forum for Urban Design and author, *Slackonomics*;

focusing on small businesses, local vernacular, amusement area size, diversity, ecology, affordability, historical legacy, infrastructure, theatricality, and local character, among other concerns. Although the comments did not add up to a plan or even a coherent vision, they did constitute a catalog of often-evocative possibilities that would be foreclosed by the 9-acre amusement park and entertainment mall envisioned by the City's proposal.

The "Imagine Coney" team held its two public workshops a few days after the release of the CUF report, and those meetings generated yet more ideas, fluctuating between the familiar and the exotic and between the practical and the whimsical. Suggestions included a "hole to China," a spectacular architecture revival, a red light district, a national eating hall of fame, interactive robots, and a vision for interspecies friendship.<sup>367</sup> The team of experts then conducted a charrette to incorporate the feedback from the brainstorming sessions into a coherent vision. It

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- Michael Sorkin, principal, Michael Sorkin Studio and director, Graduate Urban Design Program at City College;
  - Paul Goldberger, architecture critic, *The New Yorker*;
  - Kevin Baker, author, *Dreamland: A Novel*;
  - Gary Dunning, executive director, Big Apple Circus;
  - Greg O'Connell, Red Hook-based developer of Beard Street warehouse and Fairway;
  - Martin Pedersen, executive editor, *Metropolis Magazine*;
  - Charles Canfield, president, Santa Cruz Seaside Company;
  - Sharon Zukin, professor of sociology, Brooklyn College, author of *Loft Living and Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture*;
  - Charles Denson, author, *Coney Island: Lost and Found*; executive director, Coney Island History Project;
  - Karrie Jacobs, founding editor-in-chief of *Dwell*;
  - Ellen Neises, associate principal of Field Operations, a landscape and urban design firm; project designer for the Fresh Kills Park master plan;
  - Setha Low, director of the Public Space Research Group at CUNY; author, *The Politics of Public Space*;
  - Michael Singer, principal, Michael Singer Studio, an interdisciplinary environmental design and planning studio; and
  - Ron Shiffman, co-founder, Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development.

<sup>367</sup> Municipal Arts Society of New York. "Public Offers Novel Concepts for Coney Island" (blog post), November 14, 2008, <http://www.mas.org/public-offers-novel-concepts-for-coney-island/>.

released the results on November 17, 2008 before a full house at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Because of the abbreviated timeframe it operated under, the MAS team meant to produce an expressive and provocative vision, rather than a fully realized one. Perhaps for that reason, its presentation tended toward the fanciful and grandiose (e.g. a Times Square-like “electric city”; “robot wrestling”, “pizza hurling”, cable car rides through manmade clouds, and the like) (Robau 2008q). This approach ran the risk of putting off a public that had by then developed “vision” fatigue and come to regard each new plan as a sideshow to the political infighting that would determine the realistic prospects for the neighborhood. It did not help that the team’s illustrations bore a striking stylistic resemblance to earlier renderings by Thor and the City. Nonetheless, this exercise, which MAS intended as a first step toward a more detailed short-term and long-term plan, did serve the purpose of drawing attention to the future of Coney Island amusements and helped foster a public impression that that future remained up for grabs.



**Figure 41: MAS “Imagine Coney” Illustration, Boardwalk.**



Figure 42: MAS “Imagine Coney” Illustration, Corner of Stillwell and Surf Avenues.



Figure 43: MAS “Imagine Coney” Illustration, Amusement Grounds.

### **“The Grinch”**

The conversation about Coney Island’s long-term future was derailed once more in December, in what by now had become a familiar pattern, by events in the neighborhood. Thor Equities threatened a new round of evictions. The move raised the possibility of increasing the by then substantial number of vacancies in the amusement area at a time when piles of garbage and rat colonies had already been accumulating in Thor’s empty lots (Robau 2008p). The publicity generated by the apparent evictions drew attention to the decrepit state of the amusement district and earned Sitt a large New York Post caricature in the semblance of the Grinch (Caler 2008j). Eventually, Thor offered some of the Boardwalk businesses lease renewals at double the rent. Carlin, who had been by far the most politically active among them, instead got a call on December 31 from one of Thor’s employees to break the news, “We’re kicking you out. Have a happy new year”(Sederstrom 2009a). To round out the month’s string of bad press for Sitt, a Belgian film producer acquired the domain name associated with Thor’s Coney Island website. Thereafter, anyone looking for it would have found, instead of Vegas-style renderings, a greeting to “the best porn site on the net”(Calder 2009b).

The responses to Thor’s latest round of provocations were true to form. The CIDC end-of-the-year letter treated them as further demonstration of the need for a rezoning, arguing that only that could protect the neighborhood from speculative harm, while ignoring the extent to which the rezoning process had provoked the speculation to begin with (Robau 2009b). SCI held a small New Year’s Day demonstration taking aim at all major players in the project: “Sitt Kills Coney... Mayor Pays for Funeral”, “Hey, Domenic [Recchia], Don’t Let Pal Joey [Sitt] Kill

Coney!”, “CIDC = Coney Island Destruction Corporation”, “Thor No More!”, “CIDC... Go Back to the Drawing Board” (Robau 2009a). And finally, MAS stayed above the fray and released yet another batch of development ideas—this time, from its crowd-sourced web-based campaign—that were even more fanciful than the last (e.g., a cloned animal petting zoo; a giant apple orchard; a cageduppies display) (Carlson 2009).

### **The MAS Plan**

Beyond generating visions for Coney Island, MAS continued to refine the plan that its team of experts had begun. To that end, it commissioned David Malmuth, a real estate consultant from the firm RCLCo, to undertake an economic analysis of an amusement-centered development scenario.<sup>368</sup> Malmuth calculated that even with a conservative capture rate of 10% of the regional market, Coney Island could draw a minimum of 3.4 million annual visitors, a volume that could only be supported with over 25 acres of amusements. He further argued that the success of the district depended on a critical mass of amusements and that it would be bolstered by the inclusion of a singular, major ride, like the London Eye. The size of the recommended amusement area did not preclude hotel and retail uses, for which the study also found significant demand. Finally, the report concluded that, because speculation had driven up land prices, the development of the proposed amusement area would require a major land acquisition by the public—an acquisition that could be more than justified by the project’s anticipated economic impact. MAS relied on Malmuth’s work to call for an interim plan that would generate activity in

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<sup>368</sup> Robert Charles Lesser & Co., Real Estate Advisors. “Viability of an Amusement Destination at Coney Island.” Economic Briefing for the Municipal Arts Society, February 19, 2009.

the neighborhood while a long-term plan based on the report's recommendations could be formulated.

MAS' overall strategy followed an advocacy approach that had succeeded for the group during the Times Square redevelopment (Sagalyn 2003; Reichl 1999)—a project on which Malmuth had also worked. The group hoped to capture the imagination of the public with a bold vision so as to usurp the conversation about the future of Coney Island. In the case of Times Square, MAS had been able to capitalize on a series of setbacks to the original plan to introduce temporary development solutions, reopen discussions about the long-term plan, and exert substantial influence on those deliberations. In the case of Coney Island, however, that opening had thus far proved more elusive.

### **ULURP!**

On January 20, the City brushed aside the recent rush of protests and development visions and certified its plan without any major modifications, thereby giving start to the public review process.

ULURP begins when the Department of City Planning certifies the completion of a project's ULURP application, which includes all the proposed public actions and its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). Once certified, the process follows a calendar that allocates a period of review by the community board, the Borough President (BP), the City Planning Commission (CPC), and City Council. During this time (i.e., 60 days, 30 days, 60 days, and 50 days, respectively), these entities must hold public hearings and cast a vote on the ULURP action. The community board and the BP's votes and recommended modifications are non-

binding. The CPC, however, must in theory take them into account when deciding whether to reject the application or approve it for submission to the City Council.

The City's certification announcement revealed little new information. The new set of watercolor renderings it released emphasized, like the last ones, street-level carnivalesque scenes and steered clear of any hot-button issues (Robau 2009c).



**Figure 44: DCP Illustration of Proposed Redevelopment, Coney Island Comprehensive Plan, 2009.**

Those who delved into the DEIS, however, found among the disclosed expected impacts validation for some of SCI's concerns. The media focused on the likely replacement of the one-story original Nathan's Famous with a high-rise hotel and entertainment retail uses (Calder 2009a). Nathan's, however, did not preoccupy SCI greatly. Nathan's owners had neither asked for the upzoning nor announced any desire to build an expansion to its flagship restaurant (Calder 2009c). The owner of the two easternmost hotel sites, on the other hand—Thor Equities—had

expressed every intention to develop hotels in the heart of the amusement district. As a result, the ticking clock of the ULURP calendar instilled SCI with a renewed sense of urgency to alter the City's plan.

Community board input into ULURP actions tends to focus primarily on local concerns. During CB 13's review period, however, MAS made an effort to turn Coney Island's redevelopment into a matter of citywide public concern. The group presented its concerns to the New York Times editorial board, and that presentation resulted in an editorial piece calling for a larger outdoor amusements area and for the relocation of the Surf Avenue hotels.<sup>369</sup> Shortly thereafter, MAS held a public panel featuring Albert, Malmuth, and EDC's new president Seth Pinsky. The group had hoped the event would facilitate a discussion with the City of its evolving plan. Pinsky, however, did not address Malmuth's presentation, nor did he allow occasional outbursts from the audience to distract him from the City's platform. He argued that the rezoning represented a fair balancing of interests and that amusement advocates were indifferent to the plight of Coney Island residents:

For people to say, "Well, why aren't you doing more [amusements]?" is to ignore the needs of the people who actually live in Coney Island. These are 50,000 people. It's nice for us to sit across the city at 51st and Madison and say we wish that all of Coney Island were amusements. We have to be responsive to those people, too. (DePillis 2009a)

### **CB 13**

The first formal deliberation by Community Board 13 over the City's plan took place in its land use committee, which takes responsibility for evaluating land use matters and making recommendations to the rest of the board. While committee

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<sup>369</sup> "Minding Coney Island." *New York Times*, February 4, 2009.

meetings tend to be mostly internal affairs, this one drew the attendance of Recchia, City Planning, and a standing room only crowd.<sup>370</sup> The ensuing discussion reflected a tension between a desire for some sort of redevelopment plan and concerns about the particular plan under review. The committee, for instance, fretted over the phrasing that would best stress the importance of their demands without alienating the City and marginalizing themselves from the negotiation process: should it be “yes with stipulations” or “yes with conditions”? (the chair insisted on the former, because it was stronger).

The dramatic highpoint of the meeting came when one of the members, concerned with the preservation of the amusement area, presented a resolution to reaffirm the district’s current C7 zoning, a designation that the Board had in the past struggled to retain. This drew an outburst from the Recchia, who had until then quietly observed the proceedings. He urged the committee members to reject the resolution, threatening that its approval would lead the City to abandon Coney Island and all plans for the area. This was likely an overstatement. The City routinely approves actions in disregard of CB opposition and had done so in Coney Island not so long ago in connection with KeySpan Park. Nonetheless, Recchia’s threat seemed to have an effect. The resolution to preserve the current amusement district was overwhelmingly defeated without further discussion. The meeting concluded without an agreed upon set of recommendations. But these were produced outside a public forum in time for the vote of the full board.

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<sup>370</sup> Field Notes, Land Use Committee of CB 13 Meeting, CB 13 Offices, February 19, 2009.

The meeting and vote by the full CB were marred by irregularities.<sup>371</sup> A set of recommendations submitted by SCI for the board's consideration was never relayed to the board members. Then the Chair tried to eliminate the mandatory public comment period from the event. Informed that this was a required element of all community board meetings, she scheduled the public comments for after the vote. If these were attempts to streamline the proceedings and stave off the contentiousness that had surrounded previous public meetings, they failed.

The problems began during deliberations over an unrelated rezoning of Brighton Beach. As the board prepared to approve the rezoning with qualifications, the representative for that district, Councilman Nelson, urged members to vote "no with stipulations" so as to better command the City's attention. Board members would remember Nelson's words when it came time to vote on Coney Island. Before that could happen, however, they had to agree on what they were to vote on. Although some board members wanted to discuss the recommendations submitted by the land use committee, someone moved that the vote be held on the entire proposal without further deliberation. This created widespread confusion about whether people were voting on the proposal itself or deciding whether to vote for the proposal in its entirety or in parts. As that debate unfolded, several board members alluded to the Brighton Beach vote and questioned whether the "yes" vote recommended by the land use committee would make it easy for the City to ignore the community board. This set off an impassioned speech by Recchia:

Let's set this straight. If we go forward with this, *people will listen to us*. Because *I'm* going to make sure. I have a *commitment* from the *mayor* that he will listen to what the community board has to say! Because he is interested

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<sup>371</sup> Field Notes, CB 13 Public Hearing, Coney Island Hospital, March 11, 2009.

in this community! I — Domenic M. Recchia Jr. — personally spoke to Mayor Michael Bloomberg about this ULURP! And the mayor *will* listen to this ULURP! The Mayor will pay attention! I don't know about other councilmembers! I'm respected! I am looked upon in this community! And especially at City Hall! So I don't want to hear that this is a waste of time!<sup>372</sup>

That settled, the CB approved the committee's recommendations without discussion by a vote of 32-1 (deMause 2009a). The question of whether board members knew what they were voting on remains unsettled.

The long list of stipulations approved by the CB undermined central elements of the City's plan.<sup>373</sup> These included: the relocation of the hotels to the north of Surf Avenue; the elimination of the parkland designation for the amusement area; the removal of Wonder Wheel Way, a commercial corridor that cut through the amusement district; the addition of measures to protect existing amusement operators; the preservation of the parking lot slated for most of the new housing; and a fourfold increase in the maximum allowed dimensions of retail space. Taken together, the recommendations read less like a coherent vision than like an aggregation of concerns held by Thor, SCI, and other interested parties. They did not, however, add up to a coherent development agenda, and they gave the impression that board members liked that the fact that a plan was happening far more than they liked the plan's content.

EDC's response to the community board questioned the merits of all stipulations that challenged the City's plan.<sup>374</sup> A city official then accused Thor of having

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<sup>372</sup> Audio recording: <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/audio-dominic-recchia-yells-at-coney-island-hearing-6699851>

<sup>373</sup> Community Board 13, "Conditions for Passage of Coney Plan."

<sup>374</sup> Wils, Madelyn (Executive Vice President, NYC Economic Development Corp.), letter to Marion Cleaver

drafted five of them—an accusation that the board's district manager denied (Monahan 2009). In the end, however, the City got the vote it wanted. As Nelson had warned, a "yes" vote carries symbolic value. Notwithstanding the board's stipulations, the City could now say that the local community had approved its plan.

### **The Brooklyn Borough President**

During the next phase in ULURP, the month-long review by Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, the City and Thor tried to shore up their respective claims of technical expertise. The City assembled a Coney Island Amusement Advisory Panel to help shape the interim and long-term plans for the amusement park. Panelists consisted primarily of industry executives. Significantly, however, MAS's new president Vin Cipolla also received an invitation (Chatelain 2009b). Sitt countered by retaining his own experts to argue that the City's plan was unrealistic and financially unfeasible (Brown 2009a).

As the battle of experts between the City and Thor played out, SCI looked on from the sidelines and endeavored to raise public awareness so as to generate political pressure on behalf of its cause. During this period, the group organized a petition drive, a couple of fundraising parties, and a protest. Its goals remained the same—the expansion of open amusement acreage; the removal of high-rises from the amusement area; the preservation of historic buildings; and the promotion and protection of small, local businesses. Tactically, however, SCI now joined MAS in calling on the City to address their concerns by purchasing all of Thor's land.

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(Chairwoman, Community Board 13). *EDC Response to CB13's Proposed Conditions for Passage of Coney Plan* (accompanying document). March 15, 2009.

Unfortunately for both groups, Thor and the City's intermittent negotiations showed no signs of progress. To the contrary, the City dropped its offer for Thor's land from the \$110m it had offered in the fall of 2008 to \$105m (*ibid.*). Although that would net Thor \$12m, the developer's unspecified asking price remained "north of \$130m" (Sederstrom 2009b).

All parties came together on April 1, 2009 during a public hearing on the project by the City Council's Land Use and Economic Development Committees. SCI's participation was limited to a demonstration outside, before the event, calling on the City to "Buy the land; [and] Fix [the] plan" (Robau 2009d). The City, for its part, gave the usual presentation, describing Coney Island's former glory and decline, and then offering its redevelopment plan as the only way to fulfill the neighborhood's economic potential. Recchia used the opportunity to attack the City's parkland proposal, calling it a form of eminent domain and an injustice to landowners who had "taken a chance on the neighborhood."<sup>375</sup> Before doing so, the Councilman had surprised everyone by announcing that Sitt had come to an agreement with the City, but then added, "April Fools!" (Sederstrom 2009b).

### **The Second "Last Summer"**

By April Fools' Day, with the second "last summer at Coney Island" set to begin, the City and local businesses struggled to dispel the public impression that Coney Island had closed (for real, this time) (Feuer 2009). Conditions in the amusement area belied the City's "Coney Island: Really fun. Really open." publicity campaign. The rotten wooden planks in front of the Boardwalk businesses last summer were now a gaping hole. The flooring had been removed to undertake long overdue

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<sup>375</sup> Field notes, hearing, April 1, 2009.

repairs that, because of budgetary constraints, would only cover fifteen of the Boardwalk's forty-two blocks (Hays 2009). The pedestrian bridge that connects the W. 8<sup>th</sup> Street station, by the Aquarium, to the Boardwalk had reached such a dangerous state of disrepair that the City, while its agencies argued over responsibility for the structure's maintenance, blocked off access to some of its rusty guardrails and crumbling staircases (Wilkins 2009). Finally, Thor's vacant land now comprised, with the addition of the Astroland site, most of the amusement area. Given the developer's track record, locals had reason to wonder whether any worthwhile activities would take the place or whether the rats that had infested Thor's land had found a permanent home.

One business that would not be occupying Thor's land was the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, which had tried to negotiate a lease with the developer for use of the Astroland site, but walked away after Thor insisted on retaining the right to run concessions, a major source of revenue for the circus (Calder 2009d). (Ringling Brothers would end up pitching its tent at the Washington Bath's site thanks a deal with Taconic brokered by the City [Calder 2009e]). Thor eventually announced that the audaciously named Dreamland Park would return for a second season, and that, this year, it would feature more rides than Astroland, as well as the largest freak show (Robau 2009e) in the country (Sederstrom 2009c). In its western parcels, the developer would bring in Flea by the Sea, a flea market later rechristened Festival by the Sea, perhaps to give the mistaken impression of compliance with the existing zoning (Robau 2009f). Thor promised this would be no ordinary flea market, and that it would represent "a hip

new approach to the old school open air market” and include rides, live entertainment and local flavors (Robau 2009g).

Thor’s attractions failed once more to live up to their hype. The grand opening was canceled because of rain (even though it didn’t rain), and things did not get better from there. Despite a plethora of balloons and banners, the eventual opening offered few attractions. The Festival by the Sea—which, having failed to pass a safety inspection, operated under tent-less tent frames during the first part of the season—was a sparse collection of flea market merchants selling headbands, pickles, socks, and the like to the sound of loud music (deMause 2009c). The amusement rides, when they finally arrived, consisted yet again of under-attended inflatable slides and carnival attractions complemented by food carts selling \$4 deep-fried Pop Tarts. The much vaunted freak show featured primarily a menagerie of two-headed animals (deMause 2009b). The former Astroland Boardwalk arcade now sold Peruvian chicken, and Lola Staar’s old boutique became a lemonade stand. Most of these attractions would leave further in advance of the season’s closing date this year than they had the year before.

### **The BBP Vote**

The BP’s public hearing once more put on display familiar arguments. Markowitz’s sympathies were divided. The indefatigable Brooklyn booster had typically supported the administration’s aggressive development agenda throughout the borough and seemed poised to do so again. His director of land use had sat on the CIDC board since its inception and remained supportive of the project despite the revision to the plan. Nonetheless, the BP had also long been a strong supporter of

CI USA and had a close working relationship with Zigun, all of which led SCI to expect some measure of support from his office.

In the end, Markowitz's vote split the difference between the two positions, approving the project with a series of recommendations that echoed SCI's concerns. The BP called for more required ground floor amusements within the hotel and entertainment retail zone and demanded the creation of a design committee to ensure conformity to the area's tradition for architectural extravagance.<sup>376</sup> Notwithstanding his recommendations, Markowitz's endorsement gave the City a second symbolic endorsement of its plan, this time without a challenge to any of its central elements. The administration commended Markowitz for his vote and moved on to the next phase in the public review, the City Planning Commission (CPC).<sup>377</sup>

### **Exit MAS**

The panel of City-appointed amusement experts issued its recommendations shortly after the BP's vote. Predictably, given the heavy representation of executives from large amusement entities, the group suggested the consolidation of the amusement area under one large operator (McLaughlin 2009). Otherwise, it echoed the City's longstanding emphasis on the importance of Coney Island's brand and history and validated its views about the importance of year-round entertainment and about the adequacy of the plan's allocation of land to outdoor amusements.

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<sup>376</sup> Kinetic Carnaval. "BP Markowitz's Recommendations Guarantee Glitz". Blog. *Coney Island USA Presents*. April 29, 2009, <http://community.coneyisland.com/cgi-bin/yabb/YaBB.pl?num=1241054110/1>.

<sup>377</sup> "Mayor Commends B'klyn BP for Coney Recommendations." *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 5, 2009.

The MAS president's participation in the City's panel coincided with a gradual easing of MAS' public criticism of the administration's plan. This conformed to a general shift in the organization under the leadership of its new president. Since taking the helm at MAS, Cipolla had signaled a desire to retreat from the group's advocacy functions, feeling that the economic downturn rendered them superfluous.

Our role absolutely does change as the city changes. It gives an organization like MAS an opportunity to focus more on its thought-leadership position. There aren't going to be as many immediate planning and preservation battles or crises to respond to—MAS is leaving what has been a very reactive period, of neighborhood concerns and historic preservation battles and zoning initiatives. A lot of that stuff has abated. Things are just happening a lot more slowly. It's different. (DePillis 2009b)

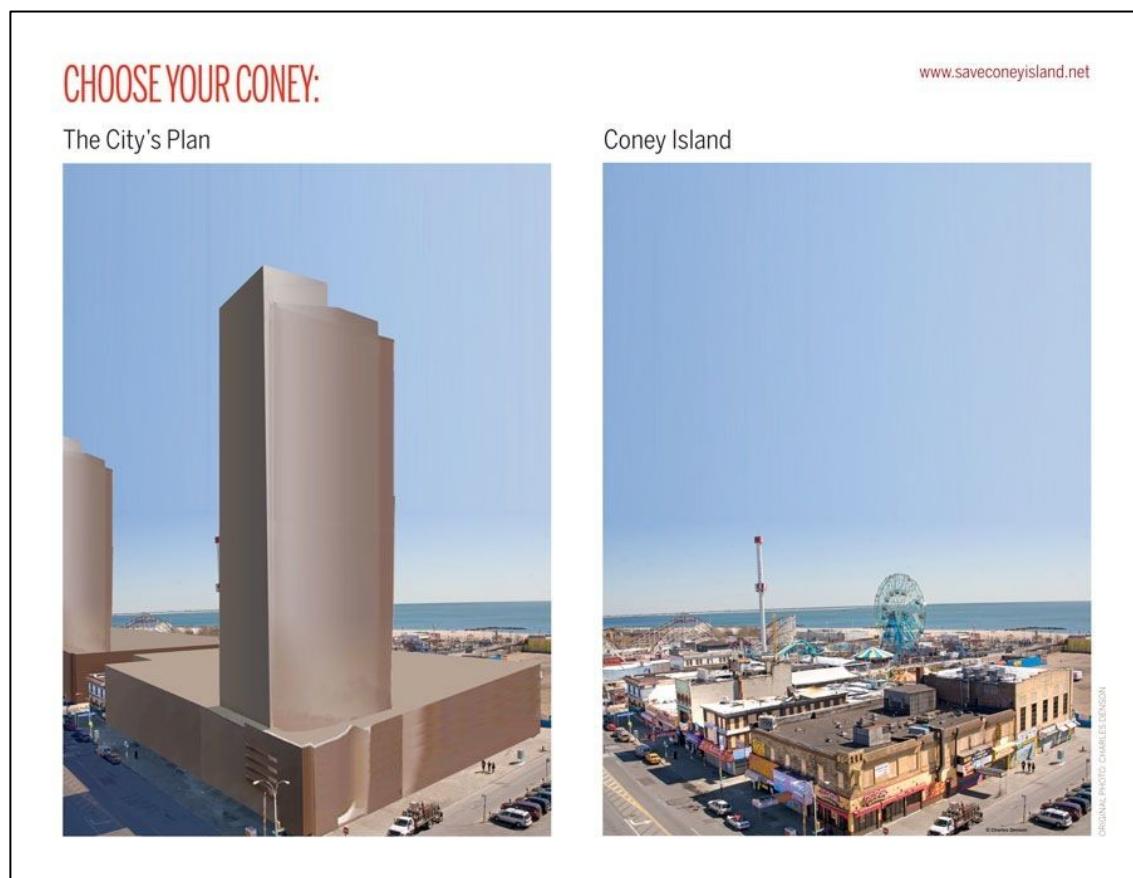
Despite MAS's change in direction, the staff members who had been working on the Coney Island project remained committed to seeing their efforts through. Seeing their work buried deep in the MAS website and finding few official avenues for their advocacy, some began to collaborate informally with SCI. By this point, SCI's membership and staff had grown substantially. The group's ongoing petition drives had yielded a mailing list of over three thousand people, and its demonstrations and public meetings had attracted a core group of volunteers who contributed some measure of expertise in journalism, graphic and web design, law, planning, and public relations. This influx helped the organization fill some of the gaps left in the wake of MAS's partial withdrawal. It also allowed Carlin to recede into the background, insulating her further political retaliation, and also allowed her to shift her focus back to her business as the high season approached.

The informal collaboration between SCI and MAS staff worked to the advantage of both groups, offering the latter an opportunity to indirectly pursue its campaign and providing the former with guidance in its efforts. Despite the diverse backgrounds of SCI members, few if any of them had any experience either lobbying or organizing advocacy campaigns. MAS had concluded early on that the best hope for its vision lay with a public acquisition of Thor's land. "Imagine Coney" and the RCLCo analysis had already made the cultural and economic case in support of that conclusion. The missing ingredient, the MAS team decided, was political pressure through a show of popular support for the public purchase. SCI made this the focus of its initiatives, starting with the April 1 demonstration that took place before the BP vote.

### **The Mermaids Take Manhattan**

SCI had never had much difficulty attracting media attention to its colorful demonstrations. During its petition drives, signatures to save the amusement area virtually collected themselves. But the group had little else to show for its efforts. This time around, as it refocused its campaign, SCI tried to develop a more graphic and streamlined message that would better communicate the likely consequences of the City's plan and the merit of its alternatives. In doing so, it hoped to both alarm the public and to capture its imagination. In collaboration with MAS, it chose as a starting point the illustration of the plan's likely impacts—illustrations that the City was under obligation to produce as part of the EIS, but hadn't, circulating instead its misleading watercolors. The far better funded MAS had agreed to produce detailed professional renderings illustrating the difference in scale between the City's plan and its own. Having produced them, however, the MAS leadership declined to release them. As a stopgap measure, SCI improvised a Photoshop job

that approximated the massing of the high-rises on the corner of Surf and Stillwell Avenue. The group made the illustrations public at a City Hall rally the week before the CPC vote (Edroso 2009a) and then incorporated them into a new glossy brochure designed to serve as a lobbying tool.



**Figure 45: Save Coney Island, Illustration of Development Density Allowed Under Proposed Rezoning.**

**THE CITY'S** current re-zoning plan, while well-intentioned, would do irreparable harm to Coney Island. But with a few critical changes to its plan, the City can save Coney Island's amusement district. Time is running out. The City Council may vote on the plan as early as July.

## WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT!

"Coney Island's future as a world-class tourist destination is being sacrificed. What could have been an economic engine for New York City and the Coney Island community is being smothered by politically motivated, uninspired development."  
—Charles Denson, Coney Island History Project



PHOTO CHARLES DENSON

"If you make it a destination, you should really think big... That's not what they're doing at the moment... I think there's a huge danger that this plan won't work... I think you have to come up with a much larger perspective for the development of Coney Island and it will be a destination or it could be a destination like the Chrysler Building, like Central Park, if you do it right."  
—Lars Liebst, CEO of Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens

# CONEY ISLAND

is a world-famous, iconic amusement destination enjoyed by all New Yorkers. But the future of Coney Island is at risk.



PHOTO CHARLES DENSON

**GET INFORMED! GET INVOLVED! JOIN THE FIGHT!**

**WRITE YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS!**

[www.saveconeyisland.net](http://www.saveconeyisland.net) ★ [info@saveconeyisland.net](mailto:info@saveconeyisland.net)

**Figure 46: Save Coney Island Lobbying Pamphlet**

Unsure of what would work, SCI alternated in its campaign between blandishment and criticism—between casting the City as Coney Island's savior and attacking its plan. It also alternated between pressure and persuasion, complementing its aggressive rallies with more congenial approaches. SCI had met with Kelly and representatives of Brooklyn City Planning early in the public review process to explain in detail its objections to the plan and to make recommendations.<sup>378</sup> That meeting had been unproductive. Kelly seemed less interested in SCI's concerns than in recruiting the group as an ally in support of the City's controversial parkland alienation proposal. Nonetheless, the group persisted in its overtures in the hopes that, as its public awareness campaign progressed, its platform would eventually find a more receptive audience among elected officials. As the CPC vote

<sup>378</sup> Advocate, personal communication, March 28, 2009

approached, however, the group trained its sights first on the planning commissioners.

The CPC's deliberations coincided with the preparations for that year's Mermaid Parade. Taking advantage once more of the publicity surrounding the event, SCI staged a stunt aimed at grabbing the attention of both the commissioners and the public. Several "mermaids," Miss Cyclone, a Coney Island troubadour, and a rabbit (i.e. Rapid T. Rabbit)<sup>379</sup> would "walk" from Coney Island to DCPs headquarters in Manhattan to deliver to City Planning Commissioner Amanda Burden several thousand signed postcards—which had been collected by SCI during a month-long petition drive—asking the City to change its plan. The mermaids would also present Burden with poster-sized renderings of the Surf Avenue high-rises so that the Commissioner could appreciate some of the impacts that her office had failed to illustrate. A cameraman would trail the group, filming the proceedings. SCI expected everyone to be turned away by front-desk security, at which point, the group would deliver its message for the cameras outside the DCP office building. To everyone's surprise, however, security waved everyone in including the cameraman. Since the guard did not provide directions, the footage shows the group wandering lost through the CPC chambers, finding their way with the help of the directory to Burden's floor, where they circulated by the cubicles of startled city planners before being intercepted a few feet short of Burdon's corner office and turned away. The plea that they had walked there "all the way from Coney Island" did not win any hearts.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Coney Island is named after the Dutch word for rabbit, an animal widespread in the peninsula when the Dutch first came upon it.

<sup>380</sup> *Mermaids Take Manhattan*. 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFVqneWdNzg>.

The video of the stunt, the “Mermaids Take Manhattan,” made the rounds in local blogs. But neither the video, the posters, nor the postcards swayed the opinion of the city planning commissioners, the majority of whom are mayoral appointees and all of whom approved the project on March 17, 2009 (Edroso 2009b). Three days later, SCI channeled its frustration into making a political statement at the Mermaid Parade. The group mobilized a handful of coordinators and two dozen volunteers, sending them into the rainy day armed with laminated maps, clipboards, petitions, and promotional materials. Because CI USA had granted SCI access to the restricted pre-parade staging grounds, the volunteers managed to distribute placards among the event’s participants, thereby allowing large portions of the procession to advertise the message: “Don’t Shrink Coney, Fix the Plan.” By the end of the day, the group had distributed well over five thousand placards, postcards, and flyers, and had given interviews to any reporter who would listen. Hoping to ride the momentum of this effort, SCI then turned its attention to City Council, whose members would have the final say on the City’s proposal.

### **City Council**

The City Council review promised to be a showdown between the City and Recchia, who remained steadfastly in Sitt’s corner (Brown 2009b). Sitt, for his part, now cast himself as a victim baffled by the obstacles that were keeping him from delivering on his good intentions: “It’s my passion to make Coney Island better. I want to give back to the neighborhood and to New York City. I am an eternal optimist, I want to make everyone happy” (Fung 2009).

But everyone was not happy. Past confrontations with the developer had led the City and SCI to doubt his good intentions. For the City, Thor stood in the way of

the proposed parkland, a key component of the plan without which the waterfront condos slated for the KeySpan parking lot could not be built. For SCI, Sitt stood in the way of a larger, more historically preserved open amusement area.

City Council traditionally follows the lead of the affected district's council member. That did not, however, stop the administration and SCI from trying to sway legislative votes. The City's lobbying efforts pushed against the limits of legality. Although all local development corporations are barred by law from trying to directly or indirectly influence elected officials, the EDC had made a practice of doing so throughout the Bloomberg administration, and the CIDC had continued this tradition (Rivera 2012). In the present case, it had collected petitions, launched promotional campaigns, and hired a lobbying and community outreach firm.<sup>381</sup> It had also packed City Council hearings with supporters by busing them in. This last gambit may have backfired on the City. Upon learning of it at a July council hearing, council members denounced the practice as a misuse of public money, further ill-disposing them to the City's plan (Brown 2009c). Several had already joined Recchia in vowing to oppose any proposal that included the use of eminent domain in whatever form (Sederstrom 2009d). At that hearing, council members had treated the City's plan with skepticism and subjected EDC President Pinsky to a hostile line of questioning about funding for the project and about the City's track record in the neighborhood (Brown 2009d). Calling the City's planning approach arrogant, two lawmakers went so far as to recommend that the plan be pulled from the public review process for reconsideration (Robau 2009h).

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<sup>381</sup> After being subjected to a three-year investigation on the matter by State Attorney General, the City admitted its wrongdoing and agreed restructure its operations as part of a settlement (Rivera 2012).

SCI lobbying efforts met with less antagonism, but with far more indifference. The group's goal was to persuade City Council to recommend amendments to the City's plan. This in itself would not remove Thor from Coney Island, but it would constrain high-density development and buy time until Sitt either sold or was forced to sell. The group knew that council members would likely defer to Recchia.<sup>382</sup> Lacking a better alternative, however, it hoped to convince lawmakers that a Coney Island rezoning was a citywide issue that concerned their constituents. Its outreach consisted of two legislative breakfasts—briefing events open to elected officials and their staff—and of meetings with representatives. The group targeted especially the representatives of SCI members, those who by reputation seemed likely to be receptive, and those who occupied the key positions of Speaker (i.e. Christine Quinn) and Chairman of the Zoning Subcommittee (i.e. Tony Avella).

SCI tried to demonstrate the citywide relevance of the upcoming vote through various displays of widespread public interest. The group divided by district the thousands of petitions it had collected and delivered them, along with promotional materials, to each of the fifty-one council members. It also pursued numerous strategies for getting people to call their representatives and Speaker Quinn. In the weeks leading up to the council's vote, SCI issued press releases (Robau 2009i), gave radio interviews, commissioned robo-calls (Save Coney Island 2009e), procured and published a letter of support from fifteen prominent New York historians (Save Coney Island 2009d), and produced a video (Save Coney Island

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<sup>382</sup> At a public hearing, Simcha Felder, a representative of the district in southern Brooklyn, told an SCI volunteer that he would stand on his head if Recchia told him to, because he did not know Coney Island well enough to form a dissenting opinion (field notes, City Council public hearing, April 1 2009).

2009a). It also co-opted for its purposes an unrelated public event—the renaming of a street in Quinn’s district in honor of Jane Jacobs—sending half a dozen volunteers dressed as Jacobs to ask what the celebrated planner would have thought of the City’s plan (Save Coney Island 2009c). On that same day, SCI published a letter that it had solicited from Jane Jacobs’ son in which he declared himself appalled by the plan and described it as antithetical to the planning principles espoused by his mother (Save Coney Island 2009b).

SCI’s efforts earned it the sympathetic ear of half a dozen council members, but a commitment from only two, Councilman Gerson from lower Manhattan and Councilman Avella, the Chairman of the Zoning Subcommittee. That subcommittee would soon be making recommendations along with the Land Use Subcommittee to the rest of the Council. Unlike more influential and longer-standing political players, however, SCI did not have a seat at the bargaining table during the committee’s deliberations. Other advocacy groups<sup>383</sup> and unions<sup>384</sup> were able to hold up negotiations over affordability guarantees and wage demands (Brown 2009e). SCI only managed to get Avella to submit an amendment to relocate the proposed hotels and expand the outdoor amusement area (deMause 2009d). The expansion did draw the support of the other groups; but it never became a bottom-line in their negotiations, and the amendment was easily defeated (Save Coney Island 2009f). In the end, the subcommittees approved the City’s plan largely intact, by a vote of 13-2, with minor concessions—a 10% increase, up to 35%, in the percentage of new residential units that would be “affordable” and a guarantee of union wages for some construction and service jobs (Durkin 2009a).

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<sup>383</sup> New York ACORN and NY Jobs with Justice

<sup>384</sup> 32BJ, SEIU, RWDSU, HTC, and UFCW Local 1500

Recchia explained in the aftermath of the vote that, while the subcommittees could not figure out a way to move the high-rises from the south side of Surf Avenue (deMause 2009d), he was still trying to find a way to expand the outdoor amusement area (Brown and Kavoussi 2009). The outcome of that effort would depend on the still unfolding negotiations between the City and Sitt, who continued to insist on retaining control of his land and participating in Coney Island's redevelopment: "I'm the guy who controls this—it's my sandbox [...But I'm willing] to share my sandbox with my friend Mayor Mike." (Goldenberg and Calder 2009) By now, notwithstanding Recchia's words, SCI held on to little hope that the City Council vote would result in any changes to the plan. The group's expectations were confirmed three days after its final rally when the Council approved the plan mostly unchanged by a vote of 44-2 with one abstention. The votes against came from Councilmen Avella and Barron. Two others might have come from Councilwoman Mendez, who abstained out of respect for Recchia (deMause 2009e), and from Gerson, who offered SCI to oppose the plan, but warned that doing so would freeze him out of future negotiations.

## XV. SCI and the City: Planning Process

### A. SCI's First Impressions

The Coney Island planning process brought the advocates into contact with each other and with the City. The ensuing interactions led to the formation of SCI and to an ongoing exchange of ideas about the neighborhood and about its redevelopment. The formal public review process (i.e., ULURP) itself entailed over half a dozen public hearings and sessions, all of which drew the advocates' attendance and participation. Formal and informal deliberations about the future of Coney Island, however, began well before ULURP, triggered by the City's own initial efforts and by the real estate speculation that followed in their wake. During the months that preceded ULURP, members of SCI often met internally and, on occasion, with city officials and elected representatives. They also attended public forums and organized rallies, political stunts, and petition drives. These activities continued throughout ULURP, intensifying during the weeks leading up to the votes cast during this process. And they continued, even after the City Council vote that concluded ULURP, as part of an attempt by the advocates to mitigate the effects of the rezoning and shape the implementation of the City's plan.

Some members of SCI greeted the growing outside interest in Coney Island—by both the City and Thor—with cautious enthusiasm. They welcomed the possibility that, after decades of neglect, the neighborhood might finally see better maintenance and new development in its vacant lots.<sup>385</sup> Their enthusiasm, however, was tempered by suspicions about the intentions behind the various publicized

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<sup>385</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 3, 2012; August 21, 2012; August 2, 2012.

redevelopment plans and by worries about the neighborhood changes that these plans might trigger. In the case of Thor, the initial excitement about the firm's proposed mega-project did not last long. Sitt's friendship with Recchia, the exorbitant prices Thor paid for Coney Island property, and the firm's history in Albee Square, all pegged Sitt as a connected speculator interested in only flipping land and not in building anything.<sup>386</sup> As Thor began to evict (or threaten with eviction) long-time businesses, including Astroland, Sitt graduated in the eyes of group members from a suspicious character to an existential threat.<sup>387</sup>

The advocates' view of the City was far more conflicted, setting concerns about future development against hopes for public investment and improved public services in the amusement district. The concerns arose from two sources: a familiarity with the City's well-established pattern of either neglecting the neighborhood or pushing through resented redevelopment projects; and firsthand experience with the recent spate of large-scale projects throughout the city.

Advocates acquainted with the City's history in Coney Island could point to efforts during Robert Moses's long tenure as Parks Commissioner to shrink the amusement area, as well as to public deals with private developers—most famously, Fred Trump—that had had a similar effect.<sup>388</sup> They could also recall how, more recently, the Giuliani administration had thwarted Horace Bullard's ambitious amusement park to build the minor league stadium on the site of the old Steeplechase Park. Otherwise, and with a few other exceptions, the City had been

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<sup>386</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 2, 2012; June 5, 2013.

<sup>387</sup> Interviews with advocates, September 10, 2012; September 7, 2012; July 13, 2012; August 8, 2012; July 11, 2013.

<sup>388</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 21, 2012; June 5, 2013.

largely absent from Coney Island for decades. In light of such enduring indifference, the advocates could not help but wonder about the administration's sudden interest in the neighborhood.

Interviewee: I had the impression of, oh dear Coney Island's getting screwed again.

Author: Why?

Interviewee: 'Cause I don't trust anybody when they say they're going to help Coney Island. 'Cause I haven't seen too much going on down there.

Author: Okay. Just because it hadn't happen before, you didn't think it was going to happen now?

Interviewee: Yeah. I mean I think in Southern Brooklyn people talk like they're going to help and restore something and then, you know, let's just have buses rather than a circus. Like, oh yeah, we can't save Steeplechase, something gets broken down all the time, nothing gets built. I just wonder if it's that kind of promises that happen. I don't even have to say it.<sup>389</sup>

Members of SCI did not have to look to the past to find grounds for their distrust of the City. Over the course of just a few years, numerous neighborhoods had undergone drastic transformations due to often-contested rezonings and large-scale projects sponsored by the Bloomberg administration. Several advocates entered the planning process mindful of the controversies that surrounded the Atlantic Yards mega-project and the rezonings of Greenpoint/Williamsburg, the Lower East Side, Downtown Brooklyn, and, not far from Coney Island, Sheepshead Bay.<sup>390</sup> Some were also keenly aware of the extensive amount of luxury housing cropping up in waterfront neighborhoods throughout the city, even in ones, like Brighton Beach, far removed from the traditional centers of real estate action.<sup>391</sup> As a result, when members of SCI learned of the City's interest in the revitalization of Coney Island, they already had a pre-formed idea of what this "revitalization" might entail.

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<sup>389</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 23, 2013.

<sup>390</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 10, 2012; July 3, 2012; August 6, 2012; July 31, 2012.

<sup>391</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 22, 2012; July 3, 2013; July 3, 2012.

I had read a little bit about what was going on with rezoning Greenpoint, Williamsburg area. I had been reading about what was happening. And I assumed that this would fall in line with that, which to me meant privileging really high density or very large buildings, whether it be residential or commercial or anything else. I assumed it meant changing the core area of Coney Island for probably the wrong reasons. And I remember pretty clearly reading an article in the Times that someone wrote basically summarizing all of the rezonings that Bloomberg had been doing. And I think I was packaging it in my mind. I think at the time I was also aware of that weird disparity between the residences towards the Brighton end and the residences not on the Brighton end. In my mind, I imagined that it was going to be higher income, seaside residences cropping up. So I do think that it was aesthetic, programmatic, all those things. Intuitive, some of it was intuitive. I'm like Bloomberg's worst nightmare.<sup>392</sup>

The advocates' accounts of the sudden transformation of familiar New York City neighborhoods focused on the displacement of longstanding establishments and cultural institutions in favor of housing, and especially of luxury housing. This development pattern inspired many of the initial misgivings about the City's involvement.

Their version of development [consisted of] new high-rise buildings, big brand retail, like chain stores. Essentially, corporate retail and large scale residential or hotel buildings that would be taller and similar to some stuff that had been built further east along Brighton Beach. I think that was a comfortable formula for the City, and I think Bloomberg in general was in favor of that. I don't think the City could maybe imagine that revitalization could just kind of happen organically on its own. From what I had seen of developments like that, they weren't nice looking. They didn't feel friendly on a human scale, they felt out of character with Brooklyn. MetroTech center in downtown Brooklyn, which just looks like shit. And they were the same people who were doing Atlantic Yards, which is was like, "Oh, great, more of that." It just didn't feel like it fit [...] So from what I knew of what that stuff looked like, and how it was implemented, and what it felt like in terms of an experience, and what I could imagine it to be, it just felt like such a tragedy. Gosh, here's this really cool place, and now it's going to be just like every other fucking place that has been redeveloped in this way. It felt very bland or soulless, or catering to a privileged elite, essentially. That opposite of what Coney Island felt like at that point.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2012.

<sup>393</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2012.

The City's announcements regarding its development goals evoked for members of SCI numerous examples of unwelcome neighborhood change—of unwanted new construction projects and lost cherished places. They also, however, called to mind one prominent counter-example, Times Square. The decades-long redevelopment of this historic entertainment mecca in mid-town Manhattan appealed to at least a few advocates.<sup>394</sup> The project had, despite earlier plans to the contrary, preserved the district's majestic theaters and entertainment function. It had also made the neighborhood more accessible by improving public safety. Even supporters, however, viewed Times Square as a mixed outcome. The area was now overrun with corporate office towers and with chain entertainment and retail venues, which, if inappropriate in that iconic neighborhood, would certainly be inappropriate in Coney Island.<sup>395</sup>

The abundance of bad precedents and scarcity of positive ones gave the advocates the impression that the City was better at destroying than at rebuilding and that it would be, at any rate, incapable of handling the complexity of the neighborhood's virtues.<sup>396</sup>

I think I felt like people were coming in, swooping in, and were going to screw it up. I felt like Coney Island was so special as it was, and that, "Oh no, the City is coming in, what are they going to do?"<sup>397</sup>

Notwithstanding their apprehension, however, most advocates reserved judgment early in the process when they learned of the City's plans. They even welcomed the

<sup>394</sup> Interviews with advocates, January 10, 2013; August 21, 2012; February 15, 2013; August 9, 2012.

<sup>395</sup> Interviews with advocates, February 15, 2013; August 22, 2012; August 6, 2012.

<sup>396</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 15, 2012; August 6, 2012.

<sup>397</sup> Interview with advocate, February 1, 2013.

administration's interest and especially its stated intention to protect and promote the amusement area.<sup>398</sup>

## B. The City's First Impressions

The administration did not share the advocates' lack of confidence in its capacity to "save" Coney Island. The agencies involved regarded themselves as experts in development and planning matters and as fully capable of diagnosing neighborhood problems. In this case, these diagnoses happened to identify problems amenable to the City's typical planning solutions. Early in the process, the City framed local disinvestment, lack of development, inadequate services, and high unemployment and poverty rates as resulting largely from the neighborhood's outdated zoning and business model. It subsequently did likewise to explain the real estate speculation and evictions that transpired throughout the planning process.

Look what's in Coney Island now. Nothing. There is speculation. There is devastation. C7 did *zero* to protect the amusements.... It's impotent zoning.<sup>399</sup>

What happened is we've left it like it is with C7 zoning for quite some time and what do you see now? You see vacant lots, you see uses that are not compliant within the C7, you see an amusement park that shrunk from what was 60 acres down to less than 5 acres.<sup>400</sup>

[C7] allows only for certain types of amusements to be built on the land, and those types of amusements have been more and more difficult to sustain. As the land then became vacant and the use declined, people had come into the neighborhood to buy the land—speculators who are speculating (and I don't mean that necessarily in a negative way) that the existing zoning, because it's not really compatible with existing needs, is gonna be changed at some time. So essentially the experiment has been run.

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<sup>398</sup> Interviews with advocates, February 13, 2012; August 6, 2012; September 7, 2012; August 2, 2012.

<sup>399</sup> Amanda Burden, interview with Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

<sup>400</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

We did leave it as it was: without City control of the land. And what happened is exactly what you saw, which is that people came in, they speculated and gambled and bet that ultimately the zoning would be changed, and they have over time forced the amusements out of the district.<sup>401</sup>

The City's confidence in its understanding of Coney Island only grew as its amusement industry research progressed.

We've met with almost anyone there is at this point in the amusement industry to understand the business model: how they work elsewhere; what's the difference between a suburban park and an urban park; what are the necessary components, because they don't teach amusements in college. It's not something you can learn so easily, so we had to educate ourselves about Coney Island and the players there and the history there, and then how the industry works elsewhere in the world.<sup>402</sup>

The expertise acquired by the City through its own research and through that of its consultants further validated the choice of redevelopment strategy—one already grounded on extensive institutional knowledge.

### C. The City and SCI's Encounter

When the City became (and was made aware) of the checkered history of planning interventions in the neighborhood, it realized that the local community might look upon its proposals with skepticism. City planners therefore sought to overcome local distrust through community engagement.

I'm the first to kind of acknowledge [that] the City in the past has made mistakes in Coney Island. I mean it was very interesting to me: a lot of these guys spoke about Robert Moses as if he was alive and well today and their next-door neighbor. I immediately ran home and went back to my planning books and reread part-portions of *The Power Broker*, and was just like "OK, I really need to familiarize myself on his impact in Coney Island." So it helped to kind of educate me the next time I went back there and say,

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<sup>401</sup> Seth Pinsky, interview by Amy Nicholson, March 18, 2009.

<sup>402</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

"You're right. There were some big mistakes made in Coney Island. We're not here to do that. I'm not Robert Moses. I can't speak for what happened at that time. I can only speak to tell you that: we want to do this with you, and you know we want to hear from you."<sup>403</sup>

The City's community engagement and analysis of the neighborhood did little to allay SCI's concerns. First, the advocates did not view the amusement district as antiquated, blighted, or in decline.<sup>404</sup> To the contrary, several noted increases in attractions and attendance in the years that immediately preceded the launch of the planning process<sup>405</sup>. While some did complain about inadequate services and maintenance, they laid the blame for these problems on the City and therefore found it shameless of the City to use its own negligence as a redevelopment rationale.

It was very annoying to me that the City all of a sudden had this interest in Coney Island, when they couldn't even in the years prior fix the boardwalk or empty the trashcans. And then they're talking about how it's broken, but they never even went into Walgreens and got a Band-Aid. But now they want to come in and basically decimate it and rebuild it with no integrity or ingenuity or creativity.<sup>406</sup>

Secondly, members of SCI held the City partly responsible for Thor Equity's activity in the neighborhood. Some, especially those acquainted with the story of Fred Trump, knew that real estate speculation had a long history in Coney Island. This latest speculative venture, however—the first in decades—came only after the administration embarked on its planning campaign. It thus seemed only reasonable to assign the City at least some of the blame for the evictions and vacancies that followed.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 17, 2013; July 13, 2012.

<sup>405</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 6, 2012; August 3, 2012.

<sup>406</sup> Interview with advocate, September 7, 2012.

<sup>407</sup> Interviews with advocates, September 26, 2012; May 22, 2013.

The City tried to deflect responsibility for the destabilizing effects of real estate speculation onto the district's outdated zoning designation and onto the longtime landowners who had sold their property (and whom the advocates, in fact, also found blameworthy).<sup>408</sup> Through its community outreach efforts, the City hoped to reassure everyone of its receptiveness, good intentions, and expertise so as to muster support for its redevelopment plan. These efforts, however, ended up having the opposite effect on members of SCI.

#### **D. The Planning Process: Pre-ULURP**

The advocates' participation in the planning process exacerbated their preconceptions and early impressions of the City. While a few members of SCI had dealt with City before the group even existed, most began to attend public events only in the weeks leading up to ULURP certification.<sup>409</sup> Only at that point had the strategic plan taken the form of actual recommendations, offering the public and the media something concrete to react to. And only at that point did deadlines arise to instill a sense of urgency in those still hoping to shape the redevelopment project. The timing of this initial involvement did not endear the City to the advocates, because it coincided with the official announcement that first made the public aware that the administration had modified behind closed doors the plan's development guidelines, drastically reducing the amount of land allocated to outdoor amusements. Members of SCI saw this as an outrageous act of betrayal and cast further doubts on the City's intentions and on its commitment to a

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> The certification of a ULURP application is the formal step that marks the beginning of the public review process.

meaningful public planning process.<sup>410</sup> Nonetheless, for lack of a better alternative, the advocates invested themselves in this process. The more optimistic among them hoped to sway decision makers by raising awareness of the amusement area's importance and thereby making it an object of citywide concern. Even those more cynical, however, felt that publicizing their grievances beat the alternative of standing by and doing nothing at all.

I just feel like the people with the money and the power are going to get what they want to get. But I felt that it was important, at least, to object to their proposals. And at least, that there was a voice out there stating their opposition to what was going on. You do what you believe is right. Even if it's a losing battle, you can always try.<sup>411</sup>

I wanted to protect what I loved, you know. I thought it was worth the effort.<sup>412</sup>

Those who viewed the public review as an opportunity to impress upon the City and council members their views of Coney Island were soon disappointed. They found the process, "disempowering in all the classic ways."<sup>413</sup> The City seemed to be "going through the motions"<sup>414</sup> and hiding behind a "smoke screen."<sup>415</sup> And they themselves felt like witnesses<sup>416</sup> to a predetermined game in which everyone played their expected role<sup>417</sup> —a "rich guys' game of Monopoly"<sup>418</sup> among interlopers.<sup>419</sup>

Author: What was your impression of the process?

Interviewee I thought, "Well, let's amuse ourselves, and go to the public review process." I don't remember which ones I did or I didn't

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<sup>410</sup> Interviews with advocates, January 10, 2013; July 3, 2013; March 15, 2013; September 6, 2012.

<sup>411</sup> Interview with advocate, June 9, 2012.

<sup>412</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2013.

<sup>413</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

<sup>414</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>415</sup> Interview with advocate, March 15, 2013.

<sup>416</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 8, 2012; October 17, 2012.

<sup>417</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 31, 2012; July 3, 2013; February 8, 2013.

<sup>418</sup> Interview with advocate, October 17, 2012.

<sup>419</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

[attend]. It was ceremonial... ceremonious. Then I called City Council people.

Author: Why [then] did you decide to participate?

Interviewee: I just knew I couldn't stand by, even though I thought it was hopeless.<sup>420</sup>

These negative impressions of the planning process were largely shaped by the City's interaction with the public and by its management of the proceedings.

Members of SCI felt that the City never adequately addressed public concerns, preferring instead to rehash its talking points and to manipulate the audience.

These efforts at manipulation often backfired. The advocates were put off, for instance, by the City's slick renderings and by its use of the word "luxury," all of which brought to mind the type of large-scale, corporate project they most hoped to avoid.<sup>421</sup> They also resented the ingratiating use of terms expected to resonate with the public—like "edgy"—especially since these bore little relation to the proposed plan.<sup>422</sup> And perhaps most of all, they worried about what the City left unsaid. The advocates found the City's presentations vague and misleading. They said little either about the project's expected physical impact or about any of SCI's various other concerns.<sup>423</sup>

Definitely I was at Lincoln High. At one moment it was just like so ... just such total bureaucracy. Everything about [the city official was] total, complete, and utter bureaucracy, like red tape. And her responses to people, when it was opened up for questioning, it was just... nothing was a clear answer. Oh, it was such bullshit.<sup>424</sup>

The City's promotion of its redevelopment plan engendered further distrust and resentment. Some of its tactics struck SCI members as underhanded, such as the

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<sup>420</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

<sup>421</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 10, 2012; July 17, 2013; February 15, 2013.

<sup>422</sup> Interview with advocate, August 15, 2012.

<sup>423</sup> Interviews with advocates, March 5, 2013; July 3, 2013; August 22, 2012.

<sup>424</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2013.

busing of plan proponents to hearings to create an impression of broad public support, as well as the effort to coerce MAS to abandon its Coney Island advocacy campaign.<sup>425</sup> Others struck them as dishonest, such as the practice of justifying the plan by pointing to consequences of its own past negligence of the neighborhood:

The real thing people need to be afraid of is doing nothing. Doing nothing has left us with large vacant pieces of land. By embracing development, good things will come.<sup>426</sup>

There has been no investment in the neighborhood for three decades. Coney Island is a brand name. If we do not act now, it could be lost forever.<sup>427</sup>

Finally, certain aspects of the City's propaganda came across as presumptuous and dismissive. Public officials repeatedly put the City's plan across as the only possible way of arresting the decline of the amusement district and of protecting it from private developers and even from future administrations.

I think it's important first of all to be clear that there is not an alternative plan that's out there for Coney Island. There are critiques of the plan that the administration has put forward, and there are concepts that have been advanced by other people, but there is no alternative plan.<sup>428</sup>

We worry that if we don't arrest the blight, someone will ask the next administration to rezone for condos and big box retail.<sup>429</sup>

Future administration will come in and someone will say, "Um, you know, amusements really don't work. I mean, there's only the Wonder Wheel left, there's only the Cyclone left. They really don't work. Let's just make it residential and a mall."<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Interviews with advocates, March 15, 2013; September 7, 2012; August 3, 2012; August 10, 2012

<sup>426</sup> Seth Pinsky as quoted in Sheftell 2009.

<sup>427</sup> Purnima Kapur as quoted in Sheftell 2009.

<sup>428</sup> Seth Pinsky, interview by Amy Nicholson. March 18, 2009.

<sup>429</sup> Robert Lieber, interview by Amy Nicholson, July 7, 2009.

<sup>430</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

There isn't another option out there.<sup>431</sup>

The City used its “our plan or no plan” logic to pit local residents against amusement advocates. It argued that the likelihood of future development and public investment in the neighborhood hinged on whether the City’s plan was adopted (an argument forcefully underscored by Recchia in response to a resolution by a CB 13 land use committee member for the preservation of the C7 designation.<sup>432</sup>) The advocates, who saw this as a false choice, found further grounds for recrimination in the City’s efforts to cast its plan as unmodifiable and criticism against it as anti-development and anti-community.

I got so angry with the [City] when they tried to divide the neighborhood residents against what they called the amusement enthusiasts. It was so Karl Rovian in its own way. Like, to divide and conquer they gave false choice to the residents. It was like, they would say to the residents, “Either you go with our plan. These amusement people only want rides, so you can’t have a restoration of the amusement area and you can’t have a restoration of the residential area.” That’s what the City was saying to the residents, who were poverty stricken and looking for jobs, making us, the so-called amusement enthusiasts, seem like we’re heartless and all we care about is our stupid roller coasters and merry-go-rounds. They were painting this false picture. It was horrible.<sup>433</sup>

The City’s intransigence and political maneuvering led the advocates to conclude that the administration was more interested in winning public approval than in subjecting its plan to public scrutiny. They found additional support for this conclusion in the City’s orchestration of the pre-ULURP public hearings, events that proved better suited for theatrics than for substantive interaction.<sup>434</sup> Rather than offer a platform for meaningful communication, these gatherings put

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<sup>431</sup> Seth Pinsky, interview by Amy Nicholson. March 18, 2009.

<sup>432</sup> Field notes, Community Board 13 land use committee meeting, March 9, 2009.

<sup>433</sup> Interview with advocate, August 21, 2012.

<sup>434</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 3, 2012; August 3, 2012; August 10, 2012.

contentiousness up on stage, thereby deepening the perceived differences among participants and further impairing the likelihood of collective deliberation.<sup>435</sup>

## E. The Planning Process: ULURP

ULURP hearings are not staged by the City but by whatever government body is reviewing the ULURP application at the time (e.g. the community board, the Brooklyn Borough President, etc.). Those hearings, however, did not improve the tenor of public deliberation and, if anything, merely provided the advocates with fresh evidence of their disenfranchisement.<sup>436</sup> Sources of dismay during ULURP included: Recchia's hectoring of community board members; the disregard for the community board's recommendations; and council members' unwillingness to take a stance on the City's proposal, despite its citywide significance, because the project fell outside their district.<sup>437</sup>

**Author:** What was your impression of the public review process in general?

**Interviewee:** Irrelevant.

**Author:** In what sense?

**Interviewee:** They didn't listen to the public in any way, shape, or form. I don't think the City's plan meaningfully changed. The community board made a lot of recommendations, most of which were ignored. They were going through the motions. Actually, I'll say more than it was just a shame; it was outrageous. The manner in which it was conducted. The community board had... it was a farce... the community board meeting where it was voted upon was a farce, an absolute farce. They were considering two issues, which are probably the two most important issues that that community board will ever consider within the decade: the downzoning of Brighton Beach, and the rezoning of Coney Island. For the Brighton Beach vote, they didn't even understand what they were voting on. Then they were browbeaten on the Coney Island vote by the local councilman, Domenic Recchia, yelling at them. People might have been sympathetic to us, but there was no meaningful discussion of the issue at this meeting. The community board recommendations

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<sup>435</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 9, 2012; February 8, 2013; August 2, 2012.

<sup>436</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 2, 2012; February 15, 2013; February 1, 2013.

<sup>437</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 8, 2012; August 17, 2012; January 10, 2013.

were prewritten. They weren't voted on individually, they were voted on as a slate. The rules of order weren't respected.

**Author:** How would you characterize your participation in the public review process?

**Interviewee:** I passed out literature that wasn't read. At the community board, I [helped] draft literature that was mostly unread by the community board.<sup>438</sup>

It was one of those terrible PowerPoints. The review process was very much [a] performance: the [labor] union people were outside; I was just silent sitting there; the old school residents were grumbling; there were a couple of certifiably nuts people. It felt like the roles were so well formed, and the City people, who were completely buttoned up and mannequin type, ... PowerPoint presentation. And the politicians were there, and the cameras were there, and it just felt impenetrable. I remember going. I was silent. I felt like I didn't quite know why I was there.<sup>439</sup>

SCI members came to see the planning process, then, as an insiders' game in which they played no significant part, often not even the role of spectators ("nothing of consequence happened in public fora."<sup>440</sup>) Every meaningful change to the redevelopment plan happened behind closed doors.<sup>441</sup> The dominant public players in these negotiations, city officials and Recchia, came across to the advocates as disingenuous.<sup>442</sup> Neither explained the impetus for, or reasoning behind, the changes to the plan. The results, however, spoke for themselves, redoubling primarily to Sitt's advantage and further downsizing the land allocated for outdoor amusements. The City could have played hard ball and countered Thor's demands with the same line it used with everyone else: "there is only one plan and there are no alternatives; it's this or nothing." But it didn't, choosing instead to reward the firm's speculative gamble at the expense of those advocating a less drastic reduction

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<sup>438</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>439</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

<sup>440</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>441</sup> Interview with advocate, August 9, 2012.

<sup>442</sup> Interviews with advocates, January 10, 2013; August 6, 2012; August 21, 2012.

of the current amusement area. This painted for SCI an unambiguous picture of who mattered during the public review and who didn't.<sup>443</sup>

The planning process presented members of SCI with one additional source of frustration. On the one hand, they regarded themselves as local experts and certainly as stakeholders in the redevelopment of Coney Island. On the other, they lacked the resources, time, and expertise to make their voices heard.<sup>444</sup> These limitations need not have mattered. The advocates had hoped that the City, given its professed interest in the amusement area, would not only welcome their input but also ask them probing questions of its own about what Coney Island amusements could be.<sup>445</sup> But it did neither. Instead, it handed down inadequate answers. This offered the advocates yet further indication of the City's indifference toward the amusement area and served perhaps as a final refutation of the repeated assertion that the City's plan (and only the City's plan) would save Coney Island.

## F. SCI's Assessment

The City's planning approach struck the advocates as an exercise either in ineptitude or cynicism. In their view, either the administration had no idea how to go about revitalizing the amusement area, or it had concocted its elaborate plan only to make more palatable the pursuit of development goals that had nothing to do with amusements. SCI's advocacy implicitly accepted the City's representations at face value. Otherwise, the group would not have bothered addressing its appeals

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<sup>443</sup> Interviews with advocates, January 10, 2013; August 15, 2012; August 21, 2012; June 5, 2013.

<sup>444</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 22, 2013; September 7, 2012.

<sup>445</sup> Interviews with advocates, July 31, 2012; July 11, 2013.

to the City. Nonetheless, it struggled to reconcile the redevelopment plan's goals with the manner of their pursuit.

First, it seemed to the advocates reckless to publicize redevelopment plans without first trying to support and stabilize existing businesses and infrastructure, including the historic infrastructure.<sup>446</sup> It seemed especially reckless given the adverse economic climate, which rendered highly unlikely in the near future the plan's anticipated private development. Had the City first addressed the existing circumstances in the amusement area, it might have improved business conditions right away and avoided the real estate speculation and evictions that followed. Second, SCI members saw the plan's focus as misdirected. Why overhaul the active corner of the amusement district when half of it lay entirely vacant?<sup>447</sup> And third, the logic of the strategy to "save" the district struck advocates as downright perverse: the City aspired to reinvigorate the amusement area by shrinking its size beyond its already modest footprint and by blocking it off with high-rise buildings.<sup>448</sup>

The advocates entertained more and less generous explanations for the plan's apparent misdirection. The more charitable ones held that the City just did not get Coney Island—that it failed to appreciate the neighborhood's unconventional charms<sup>449</sup> —or that it lacked the tools or ability to address those through a redevelopment proposal.<sup>450</sup> These theories explained several of the plan's more

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<sup>446</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 22, 2013; August 15, 2012; June 5, 2013.

<sup>447</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 3, 2012; July 11, 2013; July 31, 2012.

<sup>448</sup> Interviews with advocates, February 15, 2013; August 6, 2012; May 15, 2013.

<sup>449</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 22, 2012; August 3, 2012; August 17, 2012.

<sup>450</sup> Interviews with advocates, December 12, 2012; August 22, 2012.

disappointing features: its aesthetic and programmatic banality,<sup>451</sup> its reliance on the familiar (though risky) large-scale development template,<sup>452</sup> and its move away from the diversity of uncoordinated individual businesses and towards a model of centralized control.<sup>453</sup>

When I see those things on the plan, I think, “Well, they don’t really like the inherent eccentric quality of Coney Island, and the diverse crowds of people that come here. And this is part and parcel to why they want the boardwalk businesses to all clean up.” They don’t like the riffraff. In their eyes, they see what I enjoy about going out there, as not part of their homogenized, Times Square vision. The Bloomberg aesthetic is very... is banal the right word?<sup>454</sup>

The City can do some things right—the High Line, Grand Central, brought back to crown jewel status. It’s hard because Coney Island doesn’t even have that to work with. They don’t even have that foundation of something like Grand Central that can be polished.<sup>455</sup>

I think [relying on large-scale developers] was a comfortable formula for the City, and I think Bloomberg in general was in favor of that. I don’t think the City could maybe imagine that revitalization could happen a different way. I think it was a formula they were comfortable with, I think that was a formula that people they associated with, and Bloomberg associated with, was like, “Well, if you want to do it, you have to do it this way.” They couldn’t imagine that there was a way it could just kind of happen organically on its own.<sup>456</sup>

The advocates’ less charitable theories on the redevelopment plan looked beyond the City’s discernment and capacity, and focused on its intentions. They maintained that the City’s true planning goals had simply been antithetical to the amusement area’s complexity. According to this perspective, the City wanted to attract the sort of luxury housing project that kept proliferating throughout northern Brooklyn

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<sup>451</sup> Interviews with advocates, March 15, 2013; August 22, 2012.

<sup>452</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 9, 2012; August 15, 2012.

<sup>453</sup> Interviews with advocates, January 10, 2013; May 22, 2013; July 3, 2013; February 28, 2013.

<sup>454</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>455</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

<sup>456</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2012.

and most of Manhattan.<sup>457</sup> Paving the way for this type of large-scale development undoubtedly entailed running roughshod over the neighborhood's idiosyncratic qualities.

Author: What do you think they were actually trying to do?

Interviewee: Put up condos.

Author: You think that was the goal?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Author: Why?

Interviewee: 'Cause waterfront property is the gold mine. It's happening all over the city. And they give a little bit of public space to appease people, but ultimately they wanted to upzone.<sup>458</sup>

I think their version of revitalizing felt very developer friendly, in terms of making it easier for developers to come in and build stuff that was not entertainment, that was not amusement or rides. Like Atlantic Yards, in terms of, "Well, let's just open up the doors to large scale development by big companies. And that's what we're going to do to bring money to this area... and also new buildings that are going to have corporate retail."<sup>459</sup>

The development vision ascribed to the City by some members of SCI did not necessarily contradict the promises to preserve amusement uses in the neighborhood. But it also did not contemplate a Coney Island amusement area as the advocates had known it. Rather than improve existing conditions, it entailed the imposition of a staid mixed-use development formula.

[The] reasons [behind the plan were] not to improve on the amusement district (my sense was probably the majority of the populace would have enjoyed to see [the district] improved upon), but to bring in revenue for whichever developers happened to be convincing the City that this was the best way to go. It seemed to me that there was [no] coherent development of an exciting vision for an amusement district. It seemed that there was opportunism.<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 23, 2013; February 15, 2013; September 26, 2012; September 6, 2012.

<sup>458</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>459</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2012.

<sup>460</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

Interviewee: They were trying to turn it into a mall. For some reason, this city government, and I guess it's a financial reason—it's very short term thinking, as far as I can see—they really like chain stores. And they give incentives to chain stores to move in and move out every mom and pop thing—so something like Mall of America where the rides are inside the shopping mall place.

Author: Anything else?

Interviewee: Yeah, they were trying to make it push out the poor.

Author: Anything else?

Interviewee: They seem to be really into stamping out any cultural anything. So everything was just blank.

Author: You think that was a goal, or an effect?

Interviewee: I started to really feel that this stuff was purposeful. At first I thought it was just a horrible mistake.

Author: Why would they want to do that, you think?

Interviewee: It's not controlled? Pretty much anything I liked about New York they have decided is an eyesore and needs to go. I felt really sad. I felt like another special New York thing was going to be taken away. In [the City's] eyes, New York is where this money lives, and we're just in the way of this smooth transfer of this money. We're just a nuisance in the way. We're these weeds in the cracks of New York that [Mayor Bloomberg] would like to see gone. But that's the people. The 99% of the people.<sup>461</sup>

The anticipated effects and beneficiaries of the City's plan seemed to fit in with the redevelopment trends that SCI members had observed throughout the city. Seen in this light, the City's strategy looked like it would consist of mutually reinforcing efforts to attract a wealthier population of residents and visitors to Coney Island, and to render the neighborhood appealing to developers and investors. The administration and its supporters had themselves long presented this redevelopment approach as a solution to the neighborhood's problems ("[Coney Island] needs an infusion of residents of all income levels who can give the area some "purchasing power.")<sup>462</sup> But it was only when the approach became a plan that the advocates understood the threat it presented to the amusement area.<sup>463</sup> Instead of preserving the unique and quirky character much lauded by city

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<sup>461</sup> Interview with advocate, August 17, 2012.

<sup>462</sup> Kathryn Wylde (President of Partnership for New York City, a pro-development civic group), cited in Chatelain 2009a; see also Robert Lieber, interview by Amy Nicholson, July 7, 2009.

<sup>463</sup> Interviews with advocates, March 15, 2013; July 3, 2013; January 10, 2013.

officials, the plan sought to impose the often incompatible preferences of outsiders—of city officials or perhaps of the developers they hoped to attract.

The City was never interested in completely erasing the amusement area. They were interested in safeguarding it. But I do think the city officials also wanted Coney Island to be the sort of place where they could imagine people like themselves patronizing. I think that they wanted it to be more polished, a bit more upscale.<sup>464</sup>

I think [Bloomberg] has this patrician viewpoint, of “We know what’s best for the citizenry of the city.” I feel like a lot of these deals, maybe those are his friends, his developer buddies, the Bruce Ratners. I don’t think Joe Sitt is a friend necessarily. But I think he’s so pro pro development.<sup>465</sup>

I called Marty Markowitz’s office, and I got a rep who was trying to convince me that I would really love the Boardwalk better when it had chain stores. And that people who were smarter than I was had spent a lot of time on this plan. He said, “Oh, you’re going to like [the Boardwalk] even more when there’s more upscale places.” And I said, “Well, everyone can go to Ruby’s and have a beer and eat clams on the beach.”<sup>466</sup>

As the planning process unfolded, members of SCI began to think of the City’s proposal as a harbinger of unwelcome development and as a threat to the neighborhood features they most valued. It seemed to promise an imposition of outsider preferences at the expense of their own. Commonplace luxury development would take over most of the district, reduce the land available for amusements, and lead to the eventual displacement of small businesses and independent attractions. It might also spell the end of the diverse crowds and eccentric regulars that contributed to the Coney Island’s unique and lively atmosphere.

[The City was] thinking way too small. They were thinking building buildings that people live in, or hotels, or luxury condos is the way to get things done. It’s bullshit. It’s the Trump approach. Let’s just keep recreating

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<sup>464</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>465</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>466</sup> Interviews with advocate, August 17, 2012.

the success of the luxury condo. New York [will] become a place where people simply live. And those people who live here, they would live in half of the apartments. The other half of the apartments would be for people who don't live here who want apartments here. For what reason, I don't know. Because there's nothing to go see—the more you build those things and bury the shit that people actually want or would enjoy.<sup>467</sup>

Coney Island is still raw and edgy and ghetto, and if you're going to take that element and you're going to plop in this high-rise, whether it be a condo or a hotel, that crowd doesn't blend. They're not going to want Captain Bob hanging out on the boardwalk drunk.<sup>468</sup>

[Coney Island] was low-rise. It felt very mom and pop, with people working hard for years to bring back. I mean, the place already had soul. But a really quirky, kind of artistic energy to it, and then to have that bulldozed over and replaced with luxury condos. It just felt like such a blow.<sup>469</sup>

## G. Planning Process Effects

The planning process should have afforded ample opportunity for frank communication between the City and SCI. But it ended up facilitating little mutual understanding between the two. Baffled by the advocates' disregard for its analysis and research conclusions, the City attributed SCI's opposition to the technical ignorance, contentious character, and conservative disposition of the group's members.

It was a little surprising to me that there was such an issue with the shift in acreage, because I think if people really looked at it closely they would see it was really more of a shift from indoor to outdoor uses in the line of where the mapped parkland is. I know this is very technical, but I think that the lesson to be learned here is you really have to view this as a 27-acre amusement and entertainment destination.<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> Interview with advocate, August 9, 2012.

<sup>468</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

<sup>469</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2012.

<sup>470</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

The first thing to remember is that this is New York. And that you could have an argument over a dark grey shade for a wall and a light grey shade and the entire neighborhood would be up in arms over it. I mean, people are going to fight about everything. So I think you have to take the contention with a certain grain of salt. But putting that aside, I do think that people feel passionately about Coney Island. I think some of it is nostalgia.<sup>471</sup>

You know, this notion to leave it the way it is, I frankly don't understand at all. I find it totally unacceptable. And I think that it's people that are just fundamentally averse to change.<sup>472</sup>

The advocates, for their part, thought little of the City's expertise. They saw the City's representatives as arrogant outsiders whose knowledge of the neighborhood was beside the point and deployed in the service of ingratiating themselves.

They just sounded clueless when they talk. They sounded like people who came from Manhattan and never spent any time in Brooklyn. It sounded like [the city planner] could have been talking about anywhere. The way she kept talking, I felt like she wasn't listening to the people who the smart—were making smart arguments and the City for me is like that the City doesn't seem to listen it has an idea and it goes.<sup>473</sup>

[The director of Brooklyn City Planning] had the Power Point [...] and she was saying, such and such and blah blah blah, and "And we're going to call it Wonder Wheel Way." And I thought, "You know as much about Coney Island as that cigarette butt on the floor." I was furious. I just thought that this was the face of the City trying to sell us a bill of goods.<sup>474</sup>

[The director of Brooklyn City Planning and her assistant] were both so arrogant. I had presented myself as just some independent blogger who wanted to hear both sides of the story, and the quotes I got from them were absolutely ridiculous, about how, "If they think they're going to save Coney Island with a little acoustic guitar song,"<sup>475</sup> they have another thing coming."<sup>476</sup> I could not believe that city officials could be so openly arrogant.

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<sup>471</sup> Seth Pinsky, interview by Amy Nicholson. March 18, 2009.

<sup>472</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

<sup>473</sup> Interview with advocate, May 23, 2013.

<sup>474</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

<sup>475</sup> A member of SCI wrote early on a song entitled "Save Coney Island" that was performed by the group throughout the planning process during at rallies and public events.

<sup>476</sup> Interview with advocate, August 2, 2012.

The City, we see, fell well short of winning over members of SCI. Their encounters only confirmed some of the advocates' negative preconceptions of the City and gave rise to a fresh batch of new suspicions. They never, however, quite cleared up the inconsistencies between the City's words and its actions. The administration claimed to want a world-class amusement district, and yet intended to shrink its footprint to that of a small county fair. It professed to care about history, but was making historic buildings and businesses vulnerable to demolition and displacement. It presented large-scale, seaside residential development as the solution to all the neighborhood's problems, and yet had fought to keep Thor's proposed residential uses out of the amusement area. The City may have itself represented a threat to the amusement area, but it had also protected the district from Thor's even greater threat.

The opacity of the City's true motivation made it hard for members of SCI to gauge the effectiveness of their efforts. Some felt they had had no influence on the City's decisions.<sup>477</sup> Others believed that but for SCI's pressure, the results would have been far worse: the loss of the entire amusement area.<sup>478</sup> While the advocates' impact on the planning process remained uncertain, the impact of the planning process on the advocates did not. They described, for instance, how exposure to other groups gave them a fuller sense of the conflicting claims on the neighborhood and of the neighborhood's relation to the rest of the city.

[The planning process] laid bare some of the unpleasantness of the conflicts within the people who were involved in Coney Island. The racial disparities of the neighborhood next door in Coney Island, the frustrations of that community [with] people who were just trying to save the amusement park. That deepened and changed my understanding of what Coney Island was,

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<sup>477</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 6, 2012; July 31, 2012.

<sup>478</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 22, 2013; February 28, 2013; August 21, 2012.

within itself, and in terms of different power plays that were going on, or could be going on, and also the relationship of Coney Island to its immediate neighborhood, and also the relationship of Coney Island to the greater city, and the world, in fact. Surveying on the Boardwalk, signing petitions, we'd get people from all over the world talking about how Coney Island was a special place.<sup>479</sup>

Everyone wanted to see the new Coney Island. I was kind of shocked though. That meeting opened my eyes to a whole world of Coney Island that I didn't realize. While NYC itself had experienced a reduction in crime, apparently that didn't follow into Coney Island. Because the residents were saying, "You know, your plans are really great, but you know what, there's a shooting here every day. And it's all drug related, and what are you going to do about that? You want to put all this money into Coney Island, but what are you going to do about this area?" And was just like, wow, I never realized that.<sup>480</sup>

It helped me view Coney Island also as a place [where] people live all the time, in a community, in a home, and not just this magical place that I had the privilege to visit.<sup>481</sup>

Such encounters with alternative viewpoints made members of SCI more self-aware of their claims about the amusement area and forced them to reexamine their own sense of ownership over the place. This pushed them to ground those claims on a better-considered sense of their commitment to the neighborhood. The exposure to different groups therefore had a paradoxical result. On the one hand, it forced advocates to grapple with other perspectives of Coney Island and to scrutinize their own. On the other, this reassessment led them to draw a more deliberate line between insiders like themselves and outsiders like the City.

[I]t kind of hurt my feelings a little bit, because it's Tuesday night, and I got to be at work at 8am, and I just took a 2 hour train ride down here to basically just try contribute my presence to the groundswell of public interest in this place, I was trying to help. And yet you got these women going, "Y'all need to go on back to where y'all came from cause you don't

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<sup>479</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2012.

<sup>480</sup> Interview with advocate, August 21, 2012.

<sup>481</sup> Interview with advocate, July 17, 2013.

live here, and you don't work here." And I'm like, "This was not easy for me."<sup>482</sup>

I feel like there this unwillingness that Coney has to die. That is really exciting to attach yourself to. Here is just this, we are not going down part to Coney and I think Coney Island USA specifically and Deno's family's amusement park really have and the Cyclone really have this old school, you know, we're buckling down we're not going anywhere attitude that I love being a part of.<sup>483</sup>

The planning process, then, both expanded and limited the advocates' sense of who should have a say in planning the future of Coney Island. It made their conception of neighborhood insiders broader, but also better defined. It also had other no less contradictory effects on the advocates' opinion of the neighborhood. First, the ongoing redevelopment debates led the advocates to dream about what the amusement area could be.<sup>484</sup> At the same time, however, the planning process made little room for such visionary thinking.<sup>485</sup> On the contrary, the political wrangling that ensued discouraged fanciful musing in favor of strategic calculation.<sup>486</sup> As a result, at least some members of the group found it harder to look to Coney Island as a source of inspiration.

It became harder to dream about Coney Island when you knew that there was all this shit going on. Which I didn't like, because it was valuable to me for its dreamlike quality. When I was in it, really in the fight, you saw people yelling at each other at these meetings, you saw conflict, you saw racial tensions, you saw name calling. And more recently when we were demonstrating [on] the Boardwalk, to save Henderson's, Domenic Recchia came and cursed us out!<sup>487</sup>

There was something changing every day, I did not want to fill my head with it. I decided that I did not want to because you know Coney Island is

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<sup>482</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

<sup>483</sup> Interview with advocate, July 17, 2013.

<sup>484</sup> Interview with advocates, July 11, 2013; July 31, 2012.

<sup>485</sup> Interview with advocate, July 31, 2012.

<sup>486</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

<sup>487</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2012.

synonymous with escapism, utopia. I didn't want to have to know every politician's name and who was doing what in dollar signs, that ruined it, you know.<sup>488</sup>

Second, the rapid rate of change in the neighborhood forced advocates to pay closer attention and to take stock of what mattered to them. It made them rethink the significance of structures and features that, unthreatened, they might have overlooked.<sup>489</sup> On the other hand, the redevelopment debates made them occasionally assess that significance in terms of market value, as they might not have formerly been inclined to do.

I'd have to really get into some serious analysis, where, okay, we have this much money to spend. Here's what we get if we spend it here, here's what we get if we tear it down and build a new one. I'd have to do a full cost analysis as a businessperson. As a sentimental person, I have a tendency to want to hang on to all of it. But as I'm maturing with my relationship with Coney Island, I'm asking myself some harder questions, and that's one of the harder questions.<sup>490</sup>

[Independent businesses are] an opportunity to create something unique for tourist, like, "tourists, hey, you can come shop at the Gap at Walgreens out here in Coney Island." That's less attractive. It's about differentiation and marketing and also about preserving the interest of the zone and preserving the interest of people who are locally affected.<sup>491</sup>

Finally, the considerable time and energy spent trying to raise public awareness and sway public opinion deepened the advocates' familiarity with the amusement area and their sense of investment in its future. And yet, these efforts also sometimes had the opposite result, souring some members of the group on the neighborhood or at least tempering their enthusiasm for it.

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<sup>488</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

<sup>489</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 10, 2012; August 3, 2012; July 17, 2013.

<sup>490</sup> Interview with advocate, December 12, 2012.

<sup>491</sup> Interview with advocate, February 28, 2013.

Here is a place that's been here for so long and I've been involved with trying to save it and keep it there and have it not go away and then, to just see it turn off for good. It was really sad because Astroland was part of Coney Island. I was mad at myself for not knowing more and appreciating more of it sooner. I wish I knew what I know now when I first went there because I would have a whole different level of appreciation for it that, you know... not that I didn't appreciate it; but I just didn't know.<sup>492</sup>

I don't go there quite as much anymore. I do feel like my involvement in the process has left me with some sort of, a little bit of Coney Island burnout. And also some negative feelings towards everything that's happened there. But I still like it.<sup>493</sup>

I think it's just personal frustration. I don't think I can really enjoy the place anymore.<sup>494</sup>

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<sup>492</sup> Interview with advocate, February 8, 2013.

<sup>493</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>494</sup> Interview with advocate, August 3, 2012.

## XVI. Chronicle (Part IV)

### Closing the Deal

The City Council vote put to rest efforts to amend the redevelopment plan and redirected everyone's focus. Recchia had signed off on the rezoning only after the basic terms of the agreement between Thor and the City were put in place. That agreement, however, had not yet been finalized, and the City could not implement its development agenda until it had acquired Thor's land within the proposed parkland. Meanwhile, SCI entered a holding pattern, waiting for the City's next move, even as it considered mounting a legal challenge to the rezoning. Alternatively, the group hoped that the City would heed its calls to acquire all of Thor's land. A public acquisition would have rendered the rezoning irrelevant, removing the land from the market and reopening a political conversation about its redevelopment. It would have also removed Thor from Coney Island, an outcome that became more attractive with each passing summer.

It had been a miserable season for Coney Island businesses—by some estimates, the worst in decades. Much of this had to do with the weather: an unseasonably cold June, an unusually rainy July, and a hurricane in August (Namako, Simeone, and Nichols 2009). But Thor did not help the situation. The developer's attractions, which now took up even more real estate, had once again failed to draw crowds. To make matters worse, in mid-August, weeks before the Labor Day end of the beach season, Thor padlocked its tenants out of Dreamland because of failure to pay rent. This shut down ten out of the firm's twelve amusement rides as well as its sideshow and concessions (Edroso 2009c). The park operator acknowledged being behind in

rent payments but claimed that Thor had failed to undertake basic maintenance on the site (Durkin 2009b). An irate Recchia publicly lambasted Sitt, calling him a heartless person who only cares about money and characterizing the lockout as a Gestapo tactic (Durkin 2009c). Giving in to pressure, Thor allowed the park to reopen for Labor Day weekend; but this did little to salvage the season.

The City announced in November 2009 that it had finally reached a deal with Thor, agreeing to purchase for \$95.6 million the former Astroland site and 6.9 acres of the developer's waterfront property (Bagli 2009b). This amount appeared to fall somewhere in between the \$105 million the City had offered and the \$165 million that Thor had once requested for 10 acres of the firm's land. A dollars-per-acre comparison, however, fails to account for the 3.1 up-zoned acres—the sites along Surf Avenue and the Bowery—that remained in Thor's possession. If Sitt had intended from the outset to sell his land, as had been his practice in the past, this deal seemed like an ideal outcome. He recouped the cost of his speculative acquisitions within the core amusement area without having to incur the risk of undertaking any development; and, as a bonus, he retained title to some of the land most valorized by the rezoning. For SCI, however, the outcome could have hardly been worse (Calder 2009f). The group welcomed Sitt's removal from the proposed parkland so that new amusements could take the place of Thor's ramshackle attractions. That land, however, had never been at risk, since it had remained zoned exclusively for outdoor amusements. Sitt might have let it lie fallow; but he could not have destroyed its long-term potential for amusement uses. The land left in Thor's control, on the other hand, contained several historic low-rise buildings

and could now accommodate far more profitable development—an entertainment mall and high-rise hotels.

Concluding that the Administration would not try to mitigate the worst effects of the rezoning, SCI contemplated two courses of action: a legal challenge to the rezoning and an effort to obtain a landmark designation for the entire district.

### **The Amusement Operator RFP**

The acquisition of Thor's land allowed the City to embark on an aggressive schedule for soliciting a developer and operator that might open at least a portion of the contemplated amusement park in time for the 2010 season. To that end, EDC issued an RFP in November for three parcels—the old Astroland site (i.e., Parcel A) and the two sets of lots abutting the Boardwalk to the east and west of Stillwell Avenue (i.e. Parcels B and C)—and circulated it widely, holding one of its two Q&A sessions at the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions Exposition in Las Vegas. The City was searching for an amusement operator that would enter into a ten-year lease for the parcels and oversee their development in two phases. By the summer of the 2010 season, the operator would, as part of Phase 1, put a mix of amusements in place on at least Parcel A, undertake a marketing campaign, and generally enhance the “visitor experience in keeping with Coney Island’s tradition of public access.”<sup>495</sup> This enhancement could include site improvements as well as the programming of the undeveloped parcels with temporary forms of entertainment. During Phase 2, which the City expected to commence during the second year of operations, the operator would replace any

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<sup>495</sup> Coney Island Development Corporation. 2003. “Coney Island Strategic Development Plan Request for Proposals” (Government Document). Obtained from New York City Economic Development Corporation pursuant to the Freedom of Information Law.

remaining temporary uses with permanent attractions. Because of the abbreviated term of the lease,<sup>496</sup> and because of the capital expenditures that the proposed development would require, the City was willing to accept a “variety of rent structures,” meaning below-market rent. In addition, the operator would receive \$6.6m in public funds to further subsidize capital improvements. The RFP received tremendous attention within the amusement industry, with approximately fifty companies from over seven countries showing up at the informational sessions (Durkin 2009d). EDC expected to select the winner of the RFP by mid-January.<sup>497</sup>

The City complemented its search for an amusement operator with outreach to existing businesses within the amusement area, hoping to enlist their efforts in a marketing campaign to promote Coney Island. At the meeting with stakeholders, the CIDC proposed a fee to help finance another “Really fun! Really open!” campaign designed to counter the popular perception that had taken hold during the past two seasons. The general sense among local businesses, however, was that better publicity, while beneficial, would not address the more basic challenges that they had struggled for years to overcome. These included lack of basic services and infrastructure, such as adequate lighting and signage, proper maintenance of the boardwalk and public facilities (especially bathrooms), more convenient public transportation, and sufficient garbage pick-up. More recently, these had also included the blighted conditions of Thor’s half empty lots.

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<sup>496</sup> An RFP for a more permanent park would be issued at the conclusion of the 10 year term; CIDC “Coney Island Strategic Development Plan Request for Proposals.”

<sup>497</sup> New York City Economic Development Corporation. 2009. “Request for Proposals: Coney Island Amusement Operator” (Government Document). November 13. Obtained from NYC EDC pursuant to the Freedom of Information Law.

## The Legal Challenge

The conditions in Coney Island figured prominently in SCI's deliberations about whether to mount a legal challenge against the rezoning. Some within the group, particularly among those who worked in the amusement area, worried that legal action might delay development at a time when businesses in the neighborhood were desperate for it. In the end, however, the group felt that legal uncertainty was unlikely to derail the City's amusement park and that the long-term benefits of overturning the rezoning outweighed the small chance that it would. In early December, SCI filed its lawsuit against the City.

SCI's claim argued that the City had failed to comply with the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), the act that requires state and local governmental bodies to undertake an EIS in anticipation of any state action that might have an environmental impact.<sup>498</sup> An EIS must identify the public action's potential impacts, identify steps to mitigate its adverse impacts, and assess reasonable alternative actions (by taking a "hard look" at them and making a "reasonable elaboration" of its determination).<sup>499</sup> According to the complaint, the rezoning violated SEQRA because it relied on a defective EIS—an EIS that failed to study realistic development alternatives proposed during the public review process<sup>500</sup> and adverse impacts that the plan would have on historic buildings and view corridors.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> 6 NYCRR § 617.3(a)

<sup>499</sup> Jackson v. New York State Urban Development Corporation, 67 N.Y.2d 400, 417 (1986)

<sup>500</sup> The complaint focused specifically on MAS' proposal, arguing that, given its underlying studies and its degree of elaboration, it needed to be analyzed.

<sup>501</sup> Petition submitted to the Supreme Court of the State of New York, Save Coney Island et al. for Judgment Pursuant to Article 78 and Section 2001 of the Civil Practice Law and Rules Against The City of New York, New York City Council, and New York City Planning Commission, November 24, 2009; and Memorandum of Law on the above matter, December 7, 2009.

SCI's complaint also advanced a second legal theory to invalidate the rezoning; it argued that the City had exceeded its authority to zone. The City's zoning authority is delegated by the State for the exclusive purpose of promoting the public health, safety, and welfare of its citizens.<sup>502</sup> All zoning regulations must abide by this public purpose and conform to a "well considered plan"—conditions meant to prevent the abuse of zoning powers for the advancement of private interests. The complaint maintained that in modifying its proposal in April 2008, the City had violated those conditions, abusing its zoning powers to benefit Thor Equities rather than to promote the public good.

SCI knew that courts typically allow great latitude to cities in fulfilling SEQRA requirements and that its chances of success were low. The lawsuit also carried the risk of making the group's primary preoccupation that of fundraising to pay the lawyers' (reduced but still significant) fees. Nonetheless, SCI felt it was a chance worth taking, especially if it provided a platform to continue advocating for further public land acquisitions and an expansion to the amusement area. A decision by the court was expected no earlier than in the spring.

### **Enter Zamperla**

The City announced in February 2010 the winner of its RPF: Zamperla, a large Italian amusement ride manufacturer, which, beyond supplying attractions to far-flung amusement parks throughout the world, operated half a dozen its own, including a small seasonal one in New York's Central Park. Through its subsidiary, Central Amusement International, Zamperla would create a new amusement park and bring nineteen rides to the site of the old Astroland. Named after the historic

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<sup>502</sup> General Cities Law of the State of New York, Section 20, subsections 24 and 25

Luna Park (which had also long ago become the Italian word for amusement park), the new facility would open in May and feature a mix of thrill and family oriented rides as well as a replica of the old Luna Park's gates at its entrance (deMause 2010). Zamperla's capacity to meet this extremely aggressive deadline—one that very few amusement operators in the world could match—played a role in its selection. During the second season, the firm would add four more thrill rides to a second park, the Scream Zone, which would occupy some of the land formerly owned by Thor. In further compliance with the RFP guidelines, neither park would charge admission to enter its grounds.

The firm expected to invest \$30m in its amusement parks, along with \$6.5m in public funds. During its ten-year term, it would pay the City a well-below-market \$100k a year in rent as well as between 5% to 10% of its gross proceeds.<sup>503</sup> On the other side of the ledger, it would receive between \$750k and \$900k<sup>504</sup> a year in rent from the Boardwalk businesses, whose leases it would inherit and be able to renegotiate after the first year of operation.

### **SCI Regroups**

The Zamperla announcement was enthusiastically greeted by Ziguin, SCI, and even Albert, who, much as she had wanted to remain in Coney Island, knew that she could not have met the City's timeline (deMause 2010). Despite the pending lawsuit, SCI shared the City's hopes for the amusement park's immediate success. Not only would this help the struggling local businesses, but it would also, the

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<sup>503</sup> Central Amusement International LLC. 2009. "Response to the New York City Economic Development Corporation Request for Proposal, Coney Island Amusement Operator" (Government Document), December 18. Obtained from NYC EDC pursuant to the Freedom of Information Law.

<sup>504</sup> New York City Economic Development Corporation. "Coney Island Interim Amusement Park RFP: Questions and Responses," November 30, 2009.

group felt, make the case for the viability of amusements in Coney Island and for the advisability of their expansion. SCI's ongoing opposition to the City prevented any easy collaboration with it. Nonetheless, several of the group's initiatives aimed to complement the City's efforts or to influence them.

In March, SCI published a commentary through Center for an Urban Future, compiling suggestions from local businesses for district improvements. While some of these revisited longstanding complaints about the lack of proper services in the amusement area, the headlining recommendations focused on the need to program vacant land with temporary uses and events (Goldman, Gratt, and Rivero 2010). In addition to this op-ed piece, the group produced a Coney Island map, something no one had done for several seasons (despite Carlin's prodding). While this ended up inadvertently duplicating a similar effort by the City, SCI viewed its map as an opportunity to improve on the design quality of the official "Are You Lunatic?" and "More Oohs. New Aahs" promotional materials, which it held in low regard.

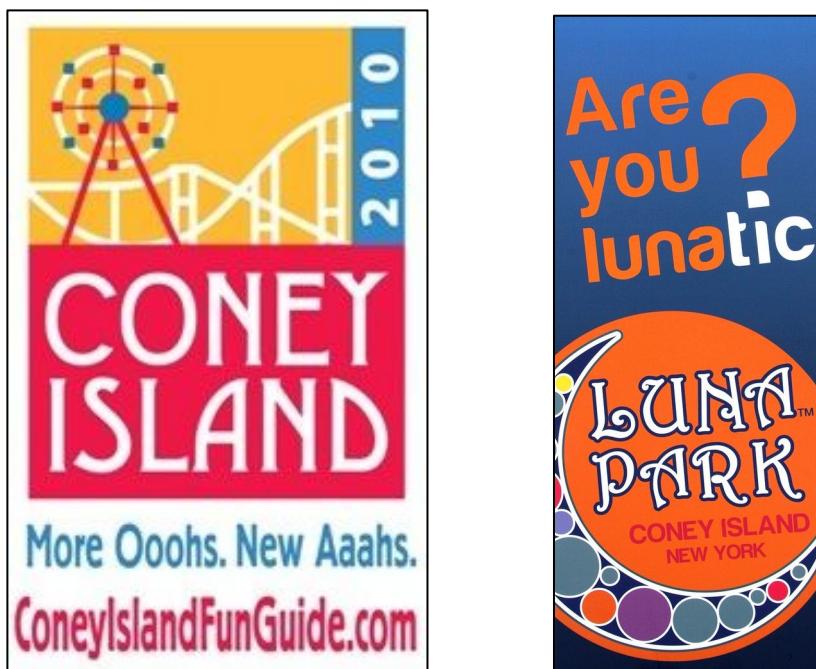


Figure 47: CIDC and Luna Park 2010 Publicity Posters.

More importantly, the map provided the group with a way to disseminate its vision of the neighborhood. Accordingly, the SCI map called attention to the area's history and historic structures, as well as to the problems created by the combined effects the rezoning and the land speculation it had engendered.



**Figure 48: Save Coney Island 2010 Visitors Map**

Finally, with an eye toward the long term, SCI hoped to help shape future development in the neighborhood by formulating and promoting an alternative plan along with a coalition of organizations that included, most notably, the New York Landmarks Conservancy. Before that initiative could get started, however, SCI got dragged into a battle that it had long anticipated.

### **"The Summer of Demolition"**

Just as excitement over the season's new amusement rides was mounting, Thor announced that "[that] summer [would] be about demolition (Maniscalco 2010). This meant that the firm intended to tear down in the coming months the old buildings it owned along Surf Avenue (i.e., Henderson's Music Hall, the Coney Island Hotel, the Grashorn, and the Coney Island Bank). The decision did not

catch SCI by surprise—the likelihood of this outcome had been among SCI's main arguments against the rezoning—but the timing did, redirecting the group's focus away from its budding proactive efforts and toward a preservation campaign that would consume its energy and resources through the rest of summer.

SCI had several reasons for wanting to preserve the Surf Avenue buildings. It regarded them as architecturally distinctive links to Coney Island's history, and it feared what would take their place. In the long-term, that likely meant high-rises, which, if built to the extent allowable by the rezoning, would block off large portions of the amusement area. In the short-term, the prospects looked no better. The renderings of Thor's intended development seemed almost designed to provoke dismay, featuring a series of storefronts suggestive of national fast food chains.



**Figure 49:** Thor Equities Rendering of Envisioned Development for Site of Henderson's Building and Shore Hotel.

Thor claimed that the demolition was a necessary first-step toward opening new retail in time for the 2011 season. SCI thought this was a lie, and not just because

of Sitt's history of false promises. Most of these buildings had been in use in recent years, and Henderson's still was. If Thor merely wanted to bring in retail, it could do so without any demolition. Instead, it had not only failed to procure new long-term tenants, but also rebuffed those who had expressed interest in renting space in its buildings (Durkin 2010a). This led SCI to conclude that the developer's true intent was to vacate the sites so as to make them easier to flip. It was assuming the trouble and expense of demolition as a precaution against the possibility of a landmark designation—a reasonable precaution in light of CI USA and SCI's past agitation.

### **The Landmarks Campaign**

CI USA had nominated six buildings—including the Grashorn and Henderson's—to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) for landmark protection as far back as 2006. The next step in the designation process would have involved a vote by the LPC on whether to schedule (or “calendar”) a public hearing on the nominated site(s). While calendaring offers no legal protection from demolition or alteration, it does create a requirement to notify the commission of any demolition permits filed for a calendared site. The LPC, however, had declined at the time to calendar any of the buildings now threatened with demolition. In light of the commission's decision, SCI worked with CIUSA, the Landmarks Conservancy, and the Historic District Council (HDC) in the weeks immediately following Thor's announcement to nominate a Coney Island Historic District, a designation that would have provided the same level of protection as individual landmark status.

The argument for a Coney Island historic district rested primarily on the connection between the buildings and the story of the neighborhood's emergence as an amusement destination around the turn of the 20th century.<sup>505</sup> The applicants recognized the rundown state of the individual buildings, but stressed their importance as a collective. Given the many structures lost in the neighborhood in recent decades, the few remaining buildings offered rare visual links to significant periods in the Coney Island's history. The Grashorn, built in the 1880s, coincided with the area's early days as a recreational destination. Henderson's dates from the 1900s, when the three major amusement parks dominated the landscape, and hosted performances by luminaries such as Al Jolson and the Marx brothers. And the art deco Bank of Coney Island sprung up during the era of the "Nickel Empire" in the 1920s.

The arguments advanced by SCI and its collaborators were enough in theory to secure a landmark designation, because the LPC has broad discretion in its evaluation of historic or cultural worth. The applicable statute defines a historic district as "[having] a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value,"<sup>506</sup> giving the LPC ample flexibility in its determinations. As a practical matter, however, the applicants—especially the longstanding preservation groups—knew that despite its nominal independence, the LPC behaved like a political body. Its commissioner is a mayoral appointee; and, not surprisingly, it defers in controversial matters to the administration. Mindful of the political circumstances and of the administration's possible opposition, the groups framed their application as part of an effort to enhance development rather than obstruct it.

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<sup>505</sup> CI USA, Request for Evaluation, submitted to The City of New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, April 13, 2010.

<sup>506</sup> N.Y. ADC. Law § 25-302

In making their case, they highlighted the limited footprint occupied by the buildings, the amount of available vacant land, and the contributing role that historic structures and cultural distinctiveness could play in the new Coney Island. They also made sure, however, not to put all their eggs in the LPC basket, and treated the landmarking process instead as only part of a broader political effort aimed at preserving the buildings.

Multiple actors could have helped achieve the goal of the preservation campaign. Sitt, the City, the LPC, and hitherto unidentified developers could each have determined the fate of Thor's buildings. With little sense of how to best proceed, SCI resolved to address them all directly and indirectly, in the hopes that through regulation, acquisition, or persuasion, it could accomplish its objective. Because these efforts consumed the group's time and resources, it could only take in stride the State Supreme Court's May rejection of its legal claim. The group's counsel believed that the decision hollowed the requirements of the Environmental Quality Review Act and that it might be vulnerable to an appeal. But SCI felt unable to raise the funds necessary to pursue further legal action (Save Coney Island 2010b).

SCI made several efforts to bolster its historic district application throughout the month leading up to the LPC determination. It participated in a preservation rally in City Hall (Save Coney Island 2010a) and solicited letters of support from Public Advocate Bill DiBlasio and from the BBP (Save Coney Island 2010c). It also held a free walking tour of the historic amusement area during Zamperla's opening day weekend. At the event, the tour guides apprised attendees of the threatened buildings' predicament and handed out SCI's new illustrated historic district

brochure, which encouraged people to call City Hall, council members, the BBP, and the LPC, and ask them to intervene (Save Coney Island 2010e). Whatever calls were made, however, did not have the desired effect.

A few days after the walking tour, on June 1, the LPC issued a letter announcing, without explanation, that “the properties [did] not appear to meet the criteria for designation as a historic district and [would] not be recommended to the Commission for further consideration.”<sup>507</sup> The commission also indicated that the evaluating committee found the threatened buildings too significantly altered to meet the criteria for designation as individual landmarks. It left, however, the applicant’s central arguments—the cultural ones—unaddressed.

### **The Preservation Campaign**

SCI pressed on with its campaign despite the LPC’s decision. During the remaining months of the season, it continued conducting bi-weekly free walking tours; it commissioned renderings illustrating possible adaptive reuses of Henderson’s, the Grashorn, and the Bank of Coney Island (Save Coney Island 2010d); it solicited a letter of support from eleven New York City historians;<sup>508</sup> it had op-ed pieces published by various authors in the New York Daily News (Rivero 2010), Huffington Post (Immerso 2010a), and the Wall Street Journal (Immerso 2010b); and it received a determination of eligibility from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation for the inclusion of the

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<sup>507</sup> Letter from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to the New York City Landmarks Conservancy, June 1, 2010.

<sup>508</sup> Bender, Thomas, Michele H. Bogart, Edwin Burrows, Charles Denson, Richard Haw, Michael Immerso, John Kasson, Francis Morrone, Barnet Schecter, Ron Schweiger, and Mike Wallace. Letter to Commissioner Robert Tierney (Landmarks Preservation Commission Commissioner), June 13, 2010.

district in the State and National Registers of Historic Places.<sup>509</sup> SCI's campaign attracted coverage by the country's leading preservation magazine, *Preservation Magazine*, a publication of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (Del Sol 2010).

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<sup>509</sup> The determination of eligibility is the first hurdle in process of inclusion in the Registers, which makes available tax credits for improvements to structures within the district. Unfortunately for the nominating coalition, the next step would have required a demonstration of support from most property owners, something SCI felt unable to obtain. (New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. 2010. "Determination of Eligibility," August 12. <http://www.saveconeyisland.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/determinationofeligibility.081210.pdf.>)

**The Bank of Coney Island**

**Restored Bank of Coney Island Building**  
3001 - 3017 West 12th Street

**Threatened with demolition by Thor Equities**

The Bank of Coney Island building was built ca. 1923 on West 12th Street and was once part of a larger bank complex that extended to the corner of Surf Avenue. Designed by Holmes & Winslow, architects that specialized in bank design, the building was executed in stone with traditional classical motifs. Many original features remain, including a large arched entrance flanked by Doric pilasters and topped by a keystone; a dentilicated cornice below the attic level; and a stone string course above the attic floor windows.

The Bank of Coney Island was originally formed to serve and strengthen the businesses and industry of the immediate area, most of which were related to amusements. Among the early founders of the Bank of Coney Island were Peter and John Coney, owners of the famous Coney Island Trolley. These included Frederick Henderson and Henderson's Hall; Charles Feltman of Feltman's beer garden (where the hotdog was invented); Henry Grashorn of the Grashorn hardware store; and William J. Weller, proprietor of the Weller's Saloon and Beer Garden. Built on the dawn of the Nickel Empire, the Bank of Coney Island building represents the solidification of the Coney Island's business community that helped define an era of stabilization and public investment in the neighborhood.

**Bank of Coney Island Building today**

**Bank of Coney Island Building, ca. 1940 (from NYC Transit Museum)**

**Bank of Coney Island Building today**

**Bank of Coney Island Building today**

**The Grashorn Building**

**Restored Grashorn Building**  
1004 Surf Avenue  
Built: ca. 1889

**Threatened with demolition by Thor Equities in the summer of 2010.**

Built around 1889, the Grashorn building once housed a hardware store and grocery owned by Henry Grashorn, a prominent Coney Island businessman. For over 60 years Grashorn's hardware store met the unique needs of amusement ride operators, carrying supplies needed for the maintenance and repair of Coney Island's mechanical rides and games.

The Grashorn was designed in the Second Empire style and although many of the exterior details are no longer visible, the form of the building is unchanged. The distinct mansard roof with four dormer windows remains and the interior is largely intact, strongly suggesting that restoration is feasible. As a remarkable example of a wood-framed building, originally covered with clapboard siding, and wooden ornamentation survived the many fires that destroyed similar buildings in Coney Island. It stands as a monument to what much of Coney Island looked like at the turn of the century, before fireproof materials became the norm for construction.

**Grashorn Building, ca. 1890**

**Grashorn Building today**

**Grashorn Building today**

**Figure 50: Save Coney Island Renderings of Adaptive Re-use of Bank of Coney Island and Grashorn Buildings.**

As part of its efforts, SCI managed, with the help of the Landmarks Conservancy,

to arrange a long-sought meeting with EDC. The purpose of the meeting was to

convince the City that preservation could play a valuable role in the redevelopment of Coney Island.<sup>510</sup> SCI prepared a presentation that catered to EDC's economic development focus and echoed the City's past rhetoric. It documented the rise and size of heritage tourism around the world, presented five cases where the preservation of vernacular structures had provided the centerpiece of heritage attractions, and mapped out how a Coney Island heritage district could help turn the area into a year round destination. Unfortunately for the group, EDC did not prove a receptive audience. Pinsky, who presided over the meeting, argued a) that preservation had been tried in Coney Island and had failed; b) that there were already enough landmarked buildings in the area; c) that the threatened buildings were not worthy of preservation; d) that preservation would hinder development; e) that Coney Island could be exciting without heritage; and f) that there was nothing the City could do to save the buildings. In closing, Pinsky explained that cities change—that without the demolition of the old Madison Square Garden we would not have the Empire State Building—and that the best course of action was to wait and see what Sitt, who in Pinsky's estimation cared about Coney Island, intended to do.

SCI emerged from the EDC meeting with little hope of swaying the City. The group rejected the view that neighborhood change happens independently of individual agency and saw the Empire State Building as an outlying case in a sea of lamentable counterexamples. As for Pinsky's opinion of Sitt, the group felt that the developer's record spoke for itself. Nonetheless, a direct appeal to Sitt was gradually emerging as the last remaining way to prevent the demolition of his

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<sup>510</sup> Advocate, personal communication, July 19, 2010.

buildings. Persuading the developer of the economic merits of preservation in the absence of a coherent plan or of support from other stakeholders seemed like a tall order. But lacking a better alternative, SCI decided to take its shot.

SCI's last preservation-related initiative consisted of a public panel intended to pave the way for a conversation with Sitt (Save Coney Island 2010f). The event featured historian Mike Wallace as the moderator and, as panelists, Coney Island historian Michael Immerso, World Monuments Fund Vice-President Lisa Ackerman, Zamperla USA president Valerio Ferrari, and RCLCo's David Malmuth, who as Disney vice-president had overseen the restoration of Times Square's New Amsterdam Theater. The participants were asked to consider and showcase ways in which Coney Island could develop as a heritage destination. Malmuth played the key role of making the economic case for this approach. SCI had invited Sitt to the event in the hopes of exposing him to the preservation arguments in anticipation of a meeting the group hoped to arrange with him and Malmuth, who had once worked for Thor.

The panel fell well short of SCI's expectations.<sup>511</sup> No one from Thor attended the event, and the attempts to arrange a meeting with Sitt fell through. The public discussion after the panel also made clear that opinion on the buildings remained divided. One local resident who had walked by the shuttered Grashorn for years regarded the building as an eyesore. Even Ferrari, on whose support SCI counted, opined that, being from Italy, he did not regard anything less than five hundred years old as historic. Nonetheless, the panel yielded an unforeseen way forward for

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<sup>511</sup> Field notes. "What's Next for Coney Island?" Panel Presentation at CUNY Graduation Center, November 30, 2010.

SCI. While organizing the event, the group had sent a cold email to developer Tony Goldman, inviting him to serve as a panelist. The invitation was a long shot, since the group has no prior relationship to Goldman. Nonetheless, SCI felt it had little to lose and much to gain in reaching out. Goldman had pioneered a preservation-oriented approach to large-scale projects in SoHo and Miami Beach. The involvement of someone of his experience, renown, and resources might have boosted both SCI's preservation efforts and its hopes of developing a more ambitious amusement-oriented plan for the district. Unexpectedly, Goldman replied to the group; and, while he could not attend the panel, he agreed to meet with its representatives.

SCI held conversations with Goldman on and off for over a year. The focus of their meetings soon shifted away from preservation and toward a larger-picture analysis of the district's development potential. This emphasis reflected not only the developer's preferred approach, but also a recognition of the changed circumstances in the amusement area, where, by the end of the year, there was much less to preserve. Demolition of the Shore Hotel, the Bank of Coney Island, and Henderson's began in December, at around the time when right across the street the Shore Theater received a long awaited landmark designation (Calder 2010e). By the spring of 2011, Goldman had undertaken a study of the neighborhood and begun to formulate an acquisition strategy. As the year progressed, however, SCI's contact with the developer waned, as did his apparent interest in the project. The loss of interest may have been health related. Tony Goldman passed away in September 2012.

### Luna Park

The preservation disputes of 2010, however much they had preoccupied SCI, had been a sideshow to the season's main attraction, the first arrival of a new amusement park in Coney Island since 1962. The lighting of Luna Park's bright entrance gate during the venue's inaugural ceremony at the beginning of the 2010 season inspired widespread enthusiasm not the least among amusement advocates (Pearson, Deutsch, and Samuels 2010). Opening weekend drew far larger crowds than it had the previous summer (Freund and Calder 2010), and businesses reported a marked increase in revenues throughout the season. Favorable weather—record breaking high temperatures<sup>512</sup>—contributed, as usual, to the boost in attendance; but many agreed that the new rides had helped fill the gap left behind by Astroland's departure and that they had played a large role in the summer's success. If the numbers did not quite match those of 2007, they at least far exceeded those of 2009 (Chaban 2010). As the season ended, however, so did Zamperla's Coney Island honeymoon, and the company got entangled in the neighborhood's latest controversy—one of its own making.

### Enter the Coney Island 8

Valerio Ferrari had notified its eleven boardwalk tenants in August 2010 that if they wanted a lease renewal, they would have to submit by the end of the month business models, including proposed rent terms and plans for growing their operations (Calder 2010a). The tenants, some of which had been there for decades (e.g., Ruby's Bar & Grill and Paul's Daughter) felt that their longevity offered proof enough of the effectiveness of their businesses approach. Most interpreted Ferrari's request as the first step towards a rent increase and felt betrayed by their

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<sup>512</sup> "Prime Number." 2010. *New York Times*, September 5.

new landlord's landlord, the City, which some of them had supported throughout the rezoning process (Pujol 2010; Calder 2010b). Meanwhile, Antonio Zamperla, the president of Zamperla's parent company, believed that in order to improve Coney Island, you had to bring in something new (Durkin 2010b).

In November, Ferrari offered assurances that updates to the Boardwalk businesses would "reflect the unique character of America's Playground" (Durkin 2010c) and shortly thereafter told all but two of the Boardwalk tenants to vacate their premises by November 15 (Calder 2010b). Only Carlin, with her design background and long-gestating expansion plans, the Beach Shop, and Nathan's Famous provided plans that met with Zamperla's approval. The ousted tenants accused the City and Zamperla of trying to gentrify Coney Island. Within a few days the group—the Coney Island 8, as they came to be known—had organized a protest at Ruby's (Bain and Fagen 2010) and retained a lawyer to fight the evictions (Pearson 2010). SCI, which around this time was organizing a meeting between Goldman and Ferrari, issued statements in support of the group (Save Coney Island 2010g) and reached out to them and to Ferrari hoping to broker a compromise. For the most part, however, the group stayed on the sidelines and stopped short of condemning Zamperla. Zigun struck a similar note, lamenting the evictions as the workings of capitalism (even as these unfolded on public land) while at the same time calling for the relocation of the businesses to the Surf Avenue spaces long occupied by non-zoning compliant furniture stores (Calder 2010c).

As the year came to a close, the future of the Coney Island 8 remained undecided. Already, however, Zamperla was fielding criticism for one its prospective new

tenants, Sodexo, a multinational purveyor of institutional food services with a history of legal entanglements over racial discrimination and student over-charging (Calder 2010d). The corporation had entered into an agreement with Zamperla before the inaugural season for the exclusive right to operate food kiosks within the amusement parks and was now looking to expand onto the Boardwalk (Vita 2011).

## XVII. SCI: Planning Outcomes

The advocates' enthusiasm for Coney Island reached a low point during the aftermath of the rezoning. By the time the City Council cast its vote, well over a dozen attractions that had been in operation just a few years before had shut their doors, and most of the district lay vacant. The rezoning made matters worse by increasing the vulnerability of much of what remained. The development potential created by the zoning change now threatened the old buildings along Surf Avenue, the remaining small arcades and games, and the establishments along the Boardwalk. It also posed a risk to the district's sense of openness, diverse crowds, and crazy atmosphere. At the time of this study, however, the ultimate outcome of the rezoning remained anyone's guess.

Asked to evaluate the immediate effects of the City's plan, members of SCI focused on three changes: the demolition of the Surf Avenue buildings, the attempt to remove the Boardwalk businesses, and the opening of Zamperla's Luna Park. The advocates saw the loss of the Surf Avenue buildings as lamentable if not altogether unexpected. Given the amount of vacant land throughout the district, the demolition of any half-worthy structure seemed like a waste. The advocates, however, regarded the lost buildings as more than half-worthy. They had been eminently adaptable for appropriate uses (and had been thus used in recent years), had contributed to the historic character of the district, and were probably going to be replaced with banal temporary structures (as some already had), high-rise hotels, or nothing at all.

When I take people there now, my storytelling starts immediately when you're exiting the subway terminal, and you can see from Stillwell Avenue

the Coney Island text hanging from the ceiling, and you look across the street where you once saw Henderson's and Faber's Fascination. (That Faber's Fascination sign is one of the first things I do actually really remember about that first memorable Coney Island visit.) The fact that you see now, instead of these amazing things, [a] nondescript rectangular building that went up with Thor Equities, that's the beginning of the sad tale I'm going to tell you about Coney Island. When I do describe what Henderson's looked like, and that there once was this grand historic theater across the street, that significant things happened there. I think it's a very obviously a squandered opportunity that anyone can see—that the first site that everyone exiting the subway station sees is a very ugly, very cheaply constructed business on a hugely important corner lot. "Welcome." You're seeing the Coney Island sign, you know you're going to Coney Island, and the first thing you see could be anywhere.<sup>513</sup>

The advocates also viewed the threatened displacement of the Boardwalk businesses as unfortunate. Those establishments had long contributed to the character of the amusement area and served as gathering spots for regulars. More than just unfortunate, the treatment of these business owners struck SCI members as unfair. Some of these people had had the vision and tenacity to remain in operation for decades, often during adverse business circumstances. Their removal would deprive them of the opportunity to reap the rewards from their investment in the neighborhood.<sup>514</sup>

It's like all right you want to come in and give grants and allow people to make their businesses better or change subway service so more people can get out here or whatever, fine. But when you say, "all right now, this can't exist here anymore 'cause we're going to do this instead 'cause it will be better." And that means now this person can't run their business. That's not fair.<sup>515</sup>

Author: Any other changes, positive or negative since the rezoning?  
 Interviewee: They drove some of [Steve from the Grill] off the Boardwalk.  
 Author: Do you have a problem with that other than...  
 Interviewee: He should have been there.  
 Author: Why?

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<sup>513</sup> Interview with advocate, August 3, 2012.

<sup>514</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 10, 2012; June 5, 2013; February 8, 2013; February 1, 2013; April 9, 2013.

<sup>515</sup> Interview with advocate, February 8, 2013.

Interviewee: Because he's been here for 37 years. He gave back to Coney Island. He was one of the few who gave back.

The third major post-rezoning neighborhood change highlighted by the advocates, Zamperla's Luna Park, drew divided opinion. Members of SCI welcomed Zamperla's arrival both because it would fill the hole left behind by the departure of Astroland and numerous independent attractions and because it would be the first new amusement park in the district in almost half a century. The opening ceremony, marked by the lighting of the entrance gate—a replica of the original Luna Park's—greatly impressed several of them. They saw the sign as indication of the company's willingness to invest in the neighborhood and to honor Coney Island's history.<sup>516</sup>



**Figure 51: Gateway to Zamperla's Luna Park.**

Interviewee: The high point of Zamperla for me was when [I saw] the raining night video of the gates of Luna Park. I was dumbfounded.

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<sup>516</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 15, 2013; February 1, 2013; August 2, 2012; August 21, 2012; December 12, 2012.

Just fucking dumbfounded by what I saw. The rest of it didn't quite live up to it for me.

Author: Why?

Interviewee: Well, it was like seeing somebody come back from the dead.

Author: And the rest of it?

Interviewee: It's kind of like [a carnival midway].<sup>517</sup>

Once in operation, the new amusement park elicited a more mixed response. Those who looked favorably upon the new Luna Park emphasized its nods to old Coney Island and its new, extreme amusement rides, which they regarded as a vast improvement over the older rides in Astroland.<sup>518</sup> Those less enthusiastic tended to dislike "dizzy" rides and were unimpressed by Zamperla's signature attractions. They lamented the absence of interesting alternatives. They also missed the craftsmanship and refinement of classic old rides<sup>519</sup> as well as the quirkiness of small independent attractions.<sup>520</sup>

Critiques of the new park often focused on its aesthetics. While members of SCI appreciated Zamperla's attempts at historical allusion, many found their execution lacking. They described the new Luna Park as sterile and generic, and its allusive gestures as inauthentic and unconvincing.<sup>521</sup>

Interviewee: [Luna] Park could be anywhere. That's the thing about chain stores.

Author: What is it about [Luna] Park that makes it seem like a chain store?

Interviewee: Maybe it's the way that it's modern. It doesn't seem like it's one of a kind.

Author: Despite the signage, all that?

Interviewee: Yeah. The signage seems like an imitation of the thing that it was.<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>517</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

<sup>518</sup> Interviews with advocates, September 6, 2012; August 2, 2012; July 3, 2013; September 7, 2012.

<sup>519</sup> Interviews with advocates, January 10, 2013; September 6, 2012.

<sup>520</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2013.

<sup>521</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 22, 2013; February 1, 2013.

<sup>522</sup> Interview with advocate, August 17, 2012.



**Figure 52:** Gateway to historic Luna Park.

Critics of Luna Park's aesthetics faulted Zamperla for merely pointing to Coney Island's history without trying to establish a connection to its traditions. Some contrasted Luna Park to the signs created by the Dreamland Artist Club. The artists who worked on that initiative familiarized themselves with traditional Coney Island signage, consulted with locals, and came up with personal interpretations of the local style. Their effort to tap into a neighborhood tradition made them part of it. Luna Park's aesthetic, by contrast, did not seem to emerge from an exchange with local sources. It came across less like an expression of insider sensibilities than like a calculated effort by outsiders to pander to local crowds by labeling and thematizing otherwise ordinary products.

Astroland was so non-corporate, so organically grown, so Coney Island-specific. It had so many people from the community working there. It was just its own thing, Astroland, as compared to this kind of corporate amusement company. Oh, yeah, some of the rides are good, but it's priced

differently. It's so generic in some ways. Maybe some of the rides are good. It's very Six Flagsy.<sup>523</sup>

[Luna Park's posters] are hideous. They look like bank advertising. It's the same thing I felt about the CIDC's and the EDC's. There's nothing exciting about it. It's very flat. It's boring typography. I think they're awful. The colors are wrong. To me it really felt like bank advertising. Like a financial institution. And the City's stuff was just as bad. And might even be the same person. There was a similarity to the imprint of the look of it.<sup>524</sup>

The advocates' discussion of Zamperla's aesthetics concerned more than merely signage or architectural detail. It dealt more broadly with the question of how a place engages people. Some members of SCI had wanted Zamperla to awe and inspire them as Steeplechase had (or as they imagined that it and the other parks would have). They hoped for an amusement park experience designed with creativity and care. In this regard, Luna Park proved disappointing. Advocates looking to be moved by their visits left instead with the impression that Zamperla lacked an interest in connecting with visitors and shaping their experience, or that it lacked the design capacity or ingenuity for doing so.<sup>525</sup>

Zamperla is stale and so boring. Even if you're riding on a ride that's going to make you throw up, it's like, "Eh, you know." It just looks too pre-fab. When you look at the signs there, it's chunky, it's drilled in, and made to look cheap. Like somebody just doesn't really care.<sup>526</sup>

The disappointing side [of Zamperla], that speaks to their tone deafness, is bringing in [food purveyor] Sodexo. That business along Surf Avenue that they have, their cafe, is really emblematic of what's wrong[...] It's both generic and profoundly unappealing. Nobody goes there. There's nothing about it that's appealing, there's nothing about it that's unique, there's nothing about it that says Coney Island.<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>523</sup> Interview with advocate, February 1, 2013.

<sup>524</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>525</sup> Interviews with advocates, October 17, 2012; March 15, 2013; January 10, 2013; September 7, 2012.

<sup>526</sup> Interviews with advocates, March 15, 2013; January 10, 2013.

<sup>527</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

Interviewee: There's no overall design. There's no sense of human accommodation or of any kind of even semi-permanence to it. That's important to me. It's the architectural context has always been important to me.

Author: Why?

Interviewee: Because it says that people live here and work here and have a community here. As bizarre as it may be.

Author: Why does that matter?

Interviewee: It's just the way I orient towards things.<sup>528</sup>

Beyond design objections, the advocates' strongest critique of Zamperla concerned aspects of their management. They disapproved, first of all, of the hike in prices, especially in light of the favorable lease terms that Zamperla got from the City.<sup>529</sup> They felt that Coney Island was supposed to be cheap.<sup>530</sup> Recalling complaints about even Astroland's lower prices, some worried that the amusement area would no longer be within the means of some of the area's typical visitors.<sup>531</sup>

The advocates also objected to Zamperla's handling of the Boardwalk businesses, which, under its lease with the City, had become lessees of the company. Here again, Zamperla decided not to pass down any of the benefits of its favorable terms, opting instead to increase its tenants' rent and demand extensive renovations as part of an effort to transform the tenor of the commercial corridor. Given the longevity and local stature of some of the Boardwalk businesses, members of SCI found Zamperla's approach unfair, high-handed, and presumptuous<sup>532</sup>, and they held the City as lessor ultimately responsible the company's behavior.

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<sup>528</sup> Interview with advocate, January 10, 2013.

<sup>529</sup> Interview with advocate, February 1, 2013.

<sup>530</sup> Interviews with advocates, March 15, 2013; August 22, 2012; October 17, 2012; August 10, 2012; February 15, 2013.

<sup>531</sup> Interviews with advocates, September 26, 2012; April 9, 2013.

<sup>532</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 21, 2012; February 1, 2013; August 6, 2012; July 11, 2013.

I recently stumbled across an old quote [in which Zamperla president Valerio Ferrari] was explaining why they were kicking out these businesses; [and] Valerio was saying, “They like things the way it is, and we don’t.” I don’t know who they are to come in with no experience of Coney Island and to say that everything Coney Island is bad. To attempt to create this disconnect with Coney Island’s history. I think in some ways maybe they’ve asked for the businesses to be made a little nicer, in a positive way. But they’re also stripping away all the handmade signs. The signs that have replaced them are not more attractive. I think they have had a real lack of respect for the place as it was, and for what came before. And I think that’s also reflected in the City’s attitude as well.<sup>533</sup>

Both objections to the management of Luna Park—the hike in prices and the attempt to overhaul Boardwalk businesses—reflected concerns about the effects of new development beyond the built environment. The advocates worried that the lack of affordability and displacement of familiar hangouts would transform the composition of the crowds and with it the character of the neighborhood.

All in all, members of SCI had mixed thoughts on Luna Park. Most eagerly welcomed the amusement park. And even those less excited about it saw it as a major improvement over the vacant lots it replaced.<sup>534</sup> Luna Park’s viability also served as a repudiation of the City’s contention that amusements could not work in the absence of cross-subsidies from hotels and entertainment retail.<sup>535</sup> Several advocates also regarded the new park as a form of restitution by the City for the damage wrought by its planning initiative. It represented a \$100m public expenditure to restore conditions in the core amusement area to what they had been at the time of the CIDC’s formation.<sup>536</sup> (“Yeah, they razed the go cart and

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<sup>533</sup> Interview with advocate, August 6, 2012.

<sup>534</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 21, 2013; July 17, 2013.

<sup>535</sup> Interview with advocate, August 15, 2012.

<sup>536</sup> Interview with advocate, August 2, 2012.

batting cages, and four years later they put back in a go cart track right across the street from where it used to be.”)<sup>537</sup>

The advocates’ objections to Luna Park did not entail an outright repudiation. Some were merely aspirational, based on ideas of how much better it could have been. Others reflected preservationist concerns. As the newly dominant presence in the district, Luna Park now had the capacity to overwhelm and extinguish some of the neighborhood qualities most valued by members of SCI. The advocates’ critiques of its management practices corresponded with the group’s attempts to preserve aspects of old Coney Island. This tension between old Coney Island and new Coney Island made members of SCI resentful that the City had imposed an unnecessary trade-off between the two. There need not have been a choice between Luna Park and the attractions and buildings lost as a result of the City’s plan. There had been ample room for both. Little remained of the old neighborhood as it was when the City took an interest in its redevelopment. Now there remained even less, and its future was up for grabs.

In the end, members of SCI reserved final judgment of the City’s redevelopment plan, regarding any such assessment as premature.<sup>538</sup> They did blame the plan for the demolitions and displacements that had transpired; and most also refused to credit the rezoning for any of the improvements that followed its ratification.

Every CIDC speaker started with “Thanks to rezoning, blah blah blah blah blah blah.” And I appreciate the good things that have happened over the past five years or so, but I have no idea what that has to do with rezoning.<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>537</sup> Interview with advocate, July 3, 2012.

<sup>538</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 15, 2012; February 28, 2013.

<sup>539</sup> Interview with advocate, August 2, 2012.

On the other hand, not all of the demolitions and displacements anticipated by the advocates had transpired. None of the development they feared—hotels, high-rises, or malls—had happened either. They may yet. Or perhaps they never will. Local historian and SCI collaborator Charles Denson would often comment that “As long as there’s vacant lots, there’s hope.”<sup>540</sup> The advocates’ hope for the future of the neighborhood depended largely on their disposition. Some believed that Luna Park might eventually adapt itself to the neighborhood and develop into an amusement park worthy of Coney Island.<sup>541</sup> Others resigned themselves to whatever changes might happen, having learned that they were powerless to stop them. They found consolation in the thought that so long as Coney Island had a beach and crazy people, they could live with that.<sup>542</sup> And yet, several advocates had already noticed fewer characters around and worried about an inevitable creep of the neighborhood toward banality.<sup>543</sup> Finally, for a few, the rezoning marked the beginning of the battle for the future of the amusement district; and they remained cautiously optimistic that somehow or other their Coney Island would survive.<sup>544</sup>

I think [history] is being carried with Coney Island. You know, like at all times at Coney Island has burned down and all that stuff [has] been rebuilt like it has a Phoenix-like quality that I don’t know if other places have. Like Coney Island is a survivor.<sup>545</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Charles Denson as quoted in deMause 2008e.

<sup>541</sup> Interview with advocate, July 11, 2013.

<sup>542</sup> Interviews with advocates, October 17, 2012, October 17, 2012.

<sup>543</sup> Interviews with advocates, May 15, 2013; February 15, 2013.

<sup>544</sup> Interviews with advocates, February 28, 2013; July 17, 2013.

<sup>545</sup> Interview with advocate, February 28, 2013.

## XVIII. Conclusion

This project has examined a controversy between SCI and the City over the redevelopment of Coney Island. Rather than focus on the concrete demands and positions that ultimately became the expression of this controversy, I have focused on how those positions originated and found articulation throughout the planning process. In doing so, I traced this planning dispute to divergent understandings of the neighborhood and of its development. In what follows, I summarize these findings and discuss their implications for the fields of city planning and historic preservation.

The meaning of a place arises from an interaction between its discursive and experiential dimensions as mediated by its materiality. Because people's engagement with these dimensions varies and has varying degrees of intensity, their views of a place differ. The City and SCI both regarded Coney Island as an iconic place. Their sense of iconicity, however, had diverse foundations and conflicted in important regards.

### A. SCI: The Iconic Coney Island Experience

Members of SCI viewed the neighborhood as inarguably historic. Images of the past figured prominently in their description of Coney Island's significance. These images, which had a wide range of sources, highlighted the epic grandeur of the early amusement parks and the extravagance, originality, and cultural influence of past attractions. They also called attention to the area's reputation for inclusiveness

and permissiveness, emphasizing eccentric local characters, bizarre spectacles, and colorful antics. This composite image of Coney Island shaped and was shaped by the advocate's experience in the neighborhood. Their descriptions of those experiences therefore echoed many of the themes evoked by their image of the place. I organized these accounts around three common themes: authenticity, diversity, and liminality.

Authenticity refers to the unmediated quality of an experience. It suggests a privileged access to something perceived as essential. Members of SCI used the concept to describe processes and "unique", "original" features that suggest an immediacy between representation and its source. These included behavior and artistic expression that, by breaking out of common molds, seemed to reflect the individuality of their author. It also referred to practices that, through longstanding association with a place, appeared to convey something true about it. Diversity emphasizes the otherness in an encounter. It describes an engaged experience with a variety of people enjoying themselves in a variety of ways—an experience of diversity that goes beyond passive people watching. Here, advocates stressed the numerous and diverse activities in the neighborhood that brought together strangers of all stripes and the carefree atmosphere that facilitated interaction among them. Liminality refers to a transgression of the ordinary—to an escape from everyday life or even a suspension of conventional norms. In the advocates' accounts, these ideas arose in connection to Coney Island's carnivalesque atmosphere and to features, such as historic vestiges and juxtapositions of physical elements, that inspired a sense of dislocation from the rest of the city. They also related to the neighborhood's

longstanding reputation for accommodating and even promoting behavior that pushed the boundaries of propriety.

The advocates' experience of Coney Island related to their image of the neighborhood in several ways. Historic representations primed members of the group to have a particular kind of experience there and validated that experience by imbuing it with the authority of historic precedent. Conversely, the advocates' experience informed and helped cement their image of Coney Island (as well as challenge divergent representations of the neighborhood). This mutually reinforcing dynamic was mediated by a built environment that made possible certain images and experiences and not others, and that itself took on significance through this process of mediation. This explains why the advocates regarded certain built structures, features, and objects—even ones widely seen as marginal—as key components of the neighborhood. It explains, for instance, the story with which I introduced this project: the story of Jane's bulb.

First, it is an unusual bulb—not like common bulbs that you find today. As a result, in its design and, even more so, in the design of the Thunderbolt sign into which it was assembled, it came across as an expression of individual creativity—as an authentic bulb. Secondly, the bulb exists in a synecdochic relation to a roller-coaster, which offers not only a stark departure from the conventional geometries of urban life, but also an escape from the common experience of gravity, making the bulb a totem of the extra-ordinary. Thirdly, the bulb represents a ride and spectacle that brings together participants and spectators and enables a rare form of joyful interaction among strangers of all stripes, turning the bulb into a bug-light of

diversity. And finally and crucially, these associations have accrued over the course of generations, transforming the bulb from an old piece of garbage into a treasured historical memento.

Moving forward to the time of the rezoning, an interaction between image and experience also illuminates the logic of SCI's preservationist concerns, which encompassed not just obvious landmarks but also seemingly marginal features. They included, for instance, the ramshackle arcades and games along Jones Walk, which the advocates viewed as eminently worthy of preservation. Their significance lay in making possible a particular Coney Island experience and in reinforcing a particular image of the place. Described in terms of their colorful operators, traditional design, and diverse spectators and participants, they went from being ordinary stalls to being an integral part of Coney Island's historic amusement landscape.

## B. The City: Coney Island, an Iconic Destination

Like members of SCI, the City saw Coney Island as a historic place and said so throughout the planning process. The Mayor himself noted the neighborhood's exalted stature from the outset, announcing that "Coney Island holds a special place in New York City's international identity and storied history" (Office of the Mayor of New York, 2003). The CIDC echoed his assessment in its first RFP, referring to the neighborhood as "one of the most historic and iconic entertainment venues in America" (Coney Island Development Corporation, 2003). The consultant team selected by the CIDC also followed suit, foregrounding Coney Island's history in its reports and describing the old neighborhood as a fantastical carnival of bizarre attractions and exotic exhibitions (Davis Brody Bond and Ernst & Young, 2004).

And even after the formulation of the redevelopment plan, the City never wasted an opportunity to raise the amusement area's early years.

It was America's first amusement park. It's the birthplace. So it holds real value in being the first.<sup>546</sup>

The City's representations of historic Coney Islands converged on similar themes as SCI's. This is not surprising, given that their accounts had common sources, including most notably Charles Denson's personal history of the amusement area. The consultant report's descriptions of early amusements closely tracked Denson's. And CIDC president Lynn Kelly described Denson himself as a personal resource and his book as "a kind of bible."<sup>547</sup>

Also like members of SCI, the City underscored the amusement area's uniqueness and cultural impact.

There's many inventions like the hot dog, the roller coaster and many things like the incubator babies and it's this sense of innovation and experimentation and edginess that I think has not been captured anywhere else in the world, period, let alone in any other amusement park. And we're working really hard to make sure it continues to stay, because we don't want any kind of cookie cutter amusement park here. I mean, I lose sleep over it at night. That's not Brooklyn.<sup>548</sup>

The City's characterizations of the neighborhood emphasized Coney Island's longtime reputation for authenticity, diversity, and "edginess," much like the advocates' accounts.

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<sup>546</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by J.L. Aronson, April 14, 2009.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

We want a large entertainment component, because that will preserve Coney's heritage and protect its authenticity and uniqueness.<sup>549</sup>

The key is to keep the diversity ... to keep Coney Island, Coney Island.<sup>550</sup>

We of course welcome innovative ideas for a 21st century destination that keeps and enhances Coney Island's unique edgy character and open accessibility.<sup>551</sup>

[Coney Island] holds a lot of value in being so experimental. It's always pushed the envelope a bit, raised your eyebrow a bit, made you a little uncomfortable, made me you laugh. So, it's that kind of theme, that energy that has really carried through since the turn of the century.<sup>552</sup>

Finally, the City's limited elaboration of the concepts raised in its descriptions relied on contrasts and examples used by the advocates, casting Disney and Manhattan as foils and extravagant local attractions as emblematic.

It's gritty, it's kitschy, it's not Disney, it's got its Brooklyn identity and we don't want to lose that.<sup>553</sup>

The Mermaid Parade is symbolic of Coney Island: loud, racy, experimental and innovative.<sup>554</sup>

In several regards, then, the City and SCI subscribed to a similar image of Coney Island. And yet, their view of the neighborhood also diverged in crucial ways. First, the experience of Coney Island hardly figured in the City's descriptions of the neighborhood. We know that at least some members of the City's team visited the amusement area. The consultants' scope of work, for instance, included site visits.

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<sup>549</sup> Bloomberg aide, as quoted in Sargent 2005.

<sup>550</sup> Seth Pinsky, as quoted in McLaughlin 2009.

<sup>551</sup> Amanda Burden, as quoted in Brown 2008c.

<sup>552</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by J.L. Aronson, April 14, 2009.

<sup>553</sup> Purnima Kapur, as quoted in Robinson 2008.

<sup>554</sup> Lynn Kelly, as quoted in Satow 2007.

Lynn Kelly said that she grew up coming to the neighborhood.<sup>555</sup> But with only rare exceptions—discussed below—their experiences did not seem to inform their depiction of the amusement area. Second, the City complemented its image of historic Coney Island with representations rooted in analyses of the real estate development landscape and of amusement and entertainment industry trends. Thus presented, the amusement area came across as underdeveloped and outdated. These representations combined with images of the neighborhood’s former glories to constitute a narrative of decline that surfaced regularly in the City’s presentations and public statements.

We all love Coney Island; it’s the birthplace of amusement districts in the world. But if you go there today, it’s clear Coney Island is past its prime.<sup>556</sup>

By approving our administration’s plan to revitalize Coney Island, the Council has helped us breathe new life into a city treasure that’s been in decline for decades.<sup>557</sup>

Coney Island’s built environment provided a basis for the City’s various representations of the district, just as it mediated the interaction between SCI’s image and experience of the amusement area. And just as it assumed meaning for the advocates through that process of mediation, it also assumed meaning for the City through its representational practices. As a result, the groups did not just disagree about the significance of the amusement area as a whole, but also about the value of its constitutive built elements. The Bank of Coney Island building offers an apt illustration. While SCI regarded the structure as a worthwhile component of the neighborhood, the City mostly ignored it, treating it as irrelevant to the area’s

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<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

<sup>556</sup> Purnima Kapur, as quoted in Robinson 2008.

<sup>557</sup> Michael Bloomberg, as quoted in Bagli 2009a.

development potential. This sort of disagreement intensified as both groups translated their views of the amusement area into plans for Coney Island's future.

### **C. The City and SCI: An Encounter of Planning Rationalities**

The City and SCI arrived at their respective redevelopment visions through the application of divergent planning rationalities—divergent ways of connecting means to planning objectives. In pursuing the goal of a revitalized amusement district, each group deployed rationalities inscribed in their modes of engagement with the neighborhood. Conflictual rationalities result not just in disparate interpretations of a place, but in disparate views of what constitutes that place. They not only set forth evaluative criteria but also certify what counts as an object of evaluation.

The reliance on diverse rationalities explains the planning dispute between SCI and the City, as well as their points of agreement. Both groups subscribed to what one might call a nostalgic rationality, which values the evocation of history and defines what counts as historic. They both felt that the redevelopment of the area should honor and perpetuate Coney Island's historic identity as an inclusive, unconventional, original, and surprising amusement district. Beyond this overlap, however, their perspectives on the neighborhood's future differed.

SCI operated primarily<sup>558</sup> within an experiential rationality that valued sensual encounters with the world and also defined what counts as an object of

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<sup>558</sup> The concept of rationalities provides an analytic stool for understanding and discussing modes of engagement. As such, it is perfectly possible to describe behavior as observing multiple and even conflicting rationalities.

perception.<sup>559</sup> As a result, it treated its history in relation to a particular kind of Coney Island experience. The City, on the other hand, operated primarily within a market rationality that privileged exchange value as a way of determining worth and also defined what lies within the market. Accordingly, it treated the area's iconic image as an asset to leverage in its bid to modernize the amusement area.

The City equated Coney Island's legacy with unrealized value of the neighborhood's "brand."

Coney Island is absolutely a brand. You can go almost anywhere in the world and someone's heard of it, has some notion about it, can at least mention one thing that they've associated or know about it, and that's pretty remarkable, especially for an amusement park. So the notion that you could actually do an amusement park there again and create this entertainment district and be a part of it in a 21st century way, from a business perspective is very attractive to a lot of people in the industry because they spend millions of dollars creating their brands everywhere else in the world. You don't have to do that in Coney Island.<sup>560</sup>

The City's effort to capitalize on Coney Island's name and history did focus on neighborhood features valued by members of SCI, but it dealt with them in terms of Coney Island's brand identity. Both sides, for example, stressed the importance of Coney Island's diversity, and their development ideas took this quality into account. For advocates, though, this involved accommodating the expression of a multiplicity of voices and making possible low-stakes interactions among strangers. For the City, it meant exploiting diversity as a marketable feature—attractive local color that matched tourists' expectations of a "real New York."

[Coney Island] cannot evolve so there's not a critical mass of New Yorkers, which means you have every age, ethnicity, background, everything that

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<sup>559</sup> Robert Lake, personal communication, August 16, 2012.

<sup>560</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

epitomizes New York, which is just a rainbow of colors and all classes, because this has to be affordable. If that changes you've lost the essence of Coney Island and I don't think tourists will come there because they won't see the real New York.

(A. Burden, as cited in Nicholson, 2009a)

Along similar lines, SCI and the City both regarded authenticity as a defining aspect of the neighborhood. For advocates, authenticity and the related qualities grouped under the notion of liminality referred to embodied engagements with the unique and the extraordinary, and they applied to a wide range of features, including local landmarks, performances, vistas, handmade signage, and ruins. For the City and its consultants, on the other hand, these attributes served primarily as market differentiators.

Our approach will be to ensure that our solutions: focus on the authentic—the real focus of New York City's seaside life; [and] preserve and reuse remaining fragments of history—resurrect the Coney Island brand as a key part of our past and connect it to today's lifestyle sensibilities.<sup>561</sup>

### **The Application of Planning Rationalities**

The City and SCI shared a proclivity for preservation as a way to shore up Coney Island's historic identity. The City's approach, however, was far more sporadic and selective, focusing exclusively on emblematic elements, like the Astroland Rocket or the B&B Carousel, and bypassing structures whose contribution to the amusement district was more experiential than symbolic. The old Surf Avenue buildings, for instance, inspired a dedicated SCI preservation campaign focused on safeguarding the character and experience of the corridor. Hardly any of those buildings,

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<sup>561</sup> Ernst & Young, LLP, David Brody Bond LLP, Halycon Ltd./Columbia Center for High Density Development, Vollmer Associates LLP, Karin Bacon Events Inc., Streetworks, and Strategic Leisure. 2004. "Coney Island Strategic Development Plan" p. 2. January.

however, elicited interest from the City or its consultants, neither of whom in the end regarded preservation as that essential to the revitalization of the neighborhood.

The City's chief strategy for taking advantage of Coney Island's brand consisted simply of retaining amusement uses within the district.

I don't know if you know that Coney Island used to be the No. 1 tourist destination in the entire world-- and the amusements are part of its iconic character, its magic, its worldwide renown and its brand name.<sup>562</sup>

The main goal here is maintaining Coney Island's unique history, character...culture...to ensure the future of this amusement area. We think that Coney Island's cache as a premier amusement destination has something that is really important.<sup>563</sup>

We want to keep the fantasy, the edginess, the accessibility, and to make it everyone's playground. How do we do that? By providing a plan that keeps the amusements year round and prominent.<sup>564</sup>

Although the City here associated amusement uses with a series of experiential qualities (i.e. fantasy, edginess, magic), it had little sense of how to address them in the formulation of its redevelopment plan. The portion devoted to amusements stressed market viability and consisted mainly of bringing in an amusement operator selected on the basis of its capacity to conform to the latest trends in the amusement industry.

[The winning proposal for developing the new amusement park] was a nice blend of honoring the history of Coney Island while developing it as a modern 21st-century amusement park. [The winning team produces] some of the most exciting rides in the world.<sup>565</sup>

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<sup>562</sup> Amanda Burden as quoted in "Burden: A Big City Needs Big Projects; Planning Chief Optimistic About Columbia Plan; Sets Coney Rules." 2007. *Crain's New York Business*, March 19, sec. Real Estate Report.

<sup>563</sup> Purnima Kapur, Director of Brooklyn Office of DCP, as quoted in Robau 2008a.

<sup>564</sup> Purnima Kapur as quoted in Sheftell 2009.

<sup>565</sup> Seth Pinsky as quoted in Povolo 2010.

The City's "demand-oriented model"<sup>566</sup> reflected its primary commitment to a market rationality. The City operated mostly within this mode of analysis not only in its evaluation of Coney Island's potential but also in its study of several other amusement parks throughout the world. As a result, even its research of other cases yielded only conclusions that validated its prior assumptions. Lynn Kelly, for instance, pointed to the presence of retail, art installations, and events in some of the parks as evidence that, "people no longer just want amusements."<sup>567</sup> Rob Lieber saw in Tivoli Gardens evidence of the viability of remaining open year-round, even in temperate climates. Neither of their assessments of Tivoli Garden's year-round success, though, seems to have considered the role played by its considerable size (15 acres) and extensive outdoor grounds, or by the sense of fantasy and immersion fostered by its design—qualities unlikely to have escaped the advocates' notice.

In its devotion to "best business practices," the City remained indifferent to possible tensions between such practices and the experience for which Coney Island has been historically known. These tensions lay at the heart of development disagreements that divided the City and SCI. The advocates valued the anarchic and unexpected atmosphere produced by the diversity of independent operators within the amusement area. The City, on the other hand, found that "the most successful [urban amusement parks] have one thing in common; and that's usually a common management entity."<sup>568</sup> For members of SCI, the low-scale of the local built environment preserved the neighborhood's sense of openness, enhanced the district's seasonal appeal, and fostered visual connections and synergies among the

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<sup>566</sup> Robert Lieber, as quoted in Calder 2007e.

<sup>567</sup> Lynn Kelly as quoted in Sederstrom 2007b.

<sup>568</sup> Lynn Kelly as quoted in Sederstrom 2007d.

beach, the Boardwalk, and local attractions. It also kept activity at street level, making crowds visible, and promoting the lively quality of a sort of urban bazaar. The City, though, regarded Coney Island's seasonality as a challenge to be overcome through high-density development consisting of high-rise hotels and large indoor malls, despite the impact these might have on the low-scale character of the district. Members of SCI valued the district's older buildings, first, for their material capacity to evoke Coney Island's storied past and deepen the cultural and aesthetic experience of the neighborhood, and second, as venues affordable to artists and small business owners who otherwise struggle to locate space within new development.<sup>569</sup> The City, on the other hand, believed that replacing these buildings with larger, newer ones would improve the amusement area by bringing it more in line with its contemporary counterparts. Finally, the advocates recommended seeking development guidance from "local experts," who, because of their special affinity for the neighborhood and its history, might devise creative projects at once unique and true to Coney Island. The City, however, sought a development formula based on national industry practices and selected a foreign corporation to carry out its implementation.

The City and SCI's general adherence to divergent rationalities did not prevent the groups from occasionally adopting that of the other. During the planning process, as we saw above, members of SCI at times considered market criteria in their evaluation of development scenarios. On the City's side, at least some consultants, especially those concerned with urban design and event programming, seemed sensitive to the experiential dimension of Coney Island, recommending a more

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<sup>569</sup> Interviews with advocates, September 7, 2012; July 3, 2012.

open-air development plan as well as attractions that encouraged innovation, exploration, and contributions from diverse participants (e.g., a new games incubator and a “fantastical garden” under the Boardwalk)<sup>570</sup> (Bacon, 2004)—recommendations that echoed some of the advocates’ own ideas. The groups’ subordinate rationalities, however, were ultimately drowned out or overridden by, or worked through, their dominant counterparts, despite, in the case of the City, occasional claims to the contrary. The most prominent of these came from DCP director Amanda Burden, who famously characterized the administration’s planning approach as a building like Robert Moses with Jane Jacobs in mind (Larson 2013). In her view, the City walked the line between Moses’ bold master plans and Jacobs’ attention to the fabric of everyday urban life.

Of course, both Jane Jacobs and Roberts Moses were right to a certain degree. Robert Moses got things done, and Jane Jacobs argued for diversity and texture.<sup>571</sup>

Even for Burden, however, qualities like diversity lacked a firm experiential basis and derived meaning primarily through public input gleaned through the planning process—the selfsame process that the advocates lambasted as ceremonial and inconsequential.

But a lot of people misinterpret Jane Jacobs because she welcomed diversity. She knew there was going to be serendipitous change in the city, and she understood this was a big city that welcomed that change. But what she encouraged was not only diversity, but that the public and the affected communities participate in *the planning process that would make that happen*. And in fact, that is what we are doing now.<sup>572</sup> (emphasis added)

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<sup>570</sup> Karin Bacon, letter to team, December 3, 2004 (p.196 of pdf document, Ernst & Young, LLP. “Coney Island Strategic Plan, Contract No. 1822000: Deliverables and Other Analysis for Task 4 - Master Plan and Strategic Development Report”)

<sup>571</sup> Amanda Burden as quoted in “Burden: A Big City Needs Big Projects; Planning Chief Optimistic About Columbia Plan; Sets Coney Rules.”

<sup>572</sup> Ibid.

In the advocates' estimation, the process that Burden expected to "make diversity happen" hardly allowed meaningful community input. To the extent it did, it was limited to input in response to a plan with the pre-determined goal of luring large levels of investment to the area—levels that Jacobs herself labeled "cataclysmic" for their capacity to destroy neighborhood diversity (Jacobs 1993). Burden's safeguard against Moses-like excesses consisted of "look[ing] at the importance of the strength of neighborhoods and of building on individual neighborhood strengths."<sup>573</sup> Those neighborhood strengths, however, were also identified by the City primarily in terms of their market potential.

Burden liked to claim that the administration took a proactive approach to zoning rather than passively reacting to developer demands.<sup>574</sup> But in fact, the City and private developers operated primarily within a common rationality. The administration based its evaluations of existing zoning and the formulation of possible rezonings on a sense of what private developers might want to do. Accordingly, it interpreted non-complying uses, real estate speculation, and vacant lots as evidence of outdated zoning regulations,<sup>575</sup> and not as evidence of, say, lack of enforcement, rent-seeking, and inadequate public services, respectively. Rezonings therefore became a way of subsidizing development so as to address current "untapped" demand and future growth (as determined by an aggressive city-wide projection<sup>576</sup> of 1 million additional residents by 2030 that has since been adjusted downward [Rubinstein 2013]). The redevelopment plan itself was

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<sup>573</sup> Amanda Burden as quoted in "Burden: A Big City Needs Big Projects; Planning Chief Optimistic About Columbia Plan; Sets Coney Rules."

<sup>574</sup> Amanda Burden, interview with Amy Nicholson. April 14, 2009.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid.

organized primarily around that economic outcome, implicitly equating market success with the public interest.

We think we have the right balance, because we're also trying to get you know some private investment in that indoor area as well, because that's gonna be expensive to build. In the beginning it was a compromise, but as we looked at it, it made a better plan, because it added to the area that could be indoors and year round... because it can only be economically successful if it's year round.<sup>577</sup>

And yet, despite their respective commitment to market and experiential rationalities, the City and SCI did not merely seek to maximize, in turn, the neighborhood's exchange value and use value. Coney Island's iconic identity—an identity defined by a marriage between commerce and leisure—blurs the boundaries between those two value categories. The amusement area's iconicity depends on the sale and purchase of recreation, a commercial tradition that has become embedded in place over time. Had the City wanted to merely maximize exchange value, it would have allowed unrestricted development in the neighborhood and would have accommodated the sort of ambitious proposals advanced by Joe Sitt. Instead, it resisted those proposals and insisted on a plan that, in keeping with the City's perspective of local identity, reserved areas for amusements, even at the cost of reduced (exchange) value. SCI, for its part, did not attempt to categorically forestall development, viewing it as a threat to use values. Rather, it sought development that enabled and promoted a kind of Coney Island experience that might have been overlooked or hindered by alternative development scenarios. In other words, both the City and SCI were trying, after their own fashion, to build upon disparate articulations of the complex relationship between commodification and desire—

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<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

articulations that they each regarded as iconic. Operating under divergent rationalities, they were both trying to formulate a plan befitting an iconic place.

## **D. Adjudicating Normative Claims**

The planning process, according to members of SCI, offered an inadequate platform for negotiating their differences with the City. The advocates lamented, for instance, the City's lack of transparency and receptiveness, as well as event formats more geared toward showboating than worthwhile exchange. The focus of this study, however, has been the grounds for the controversy between the City and SCI and the origins of their views about Coney Island and about its redevelopment. I have therefore been less concerned with the inadequacies of planning process mechanics than with the implications of those inadequacies. For the remainder of this final chapter, I address the significance of SCI's opposition to the City's plan and of planners' failure to account for the group's claims.

Prior to the question of how the advocates might have had greater input into the planning process lies the question of whether they should have. Experiential or phenomenological accounts such as the ones that form the basis of this study beg for a justification of their relevance—a reply to the objection that everyone has an opinion and an experience, so why should some matter more than any others? At a most basic level, the response to this is that the views of those who claim a stake in a project deserve a voice in a planning process. They deserve it both as a matter of equity and as a necessary step toward achieving a fuller understanding of a neighborhood and of the consequences of its redevelopment. A meaningful consideration of stakeholder's views requires more than merely taking inventory of

reactive negotiation demands. It requires making sense of the values that give rise to those views.

The members of SCI became stakeholders in the redevelopment of Coney Island by virtue of their participation in the planning process, and more so by virtue of their collective mobilization. When they learned of the City's plan, they clearly found much to dislike. Merely asking about their dislikes, however, or about how they might have changed the plan, would have reduced their views to consumer preferences, without shedding light on the values that underlay those preferences. It would have treated their desires and inclinations as arbitrary, limiting the possibility of conflict resolution to a zero-sum adversarial negotiation. Examining instead the group's understanding of the neighborhood's meanings and functions might have helped explain their development vision and opened up possibilities for conflict resolution based not on zero-sum concessions, but on a negotiated reconceptualization of the place and of what its future might entail.

Stakeholder claims about the iconicity of a place compel careful consideration for their own reasons. They cast the place as an object of broader public concern and implicitly call on the City to attend to its public dimension. Members of SCI and the administration both shared a belief in the City's role as steward of the public interest. The subscribed, however, to very different notions of how it should dispense that responsibility. Those differences and the normative assumptions from which they arose should have themselves been held up for public deliberation as an essential part of the evaluation of Coney Island's iconicity.

### The City's Normative Claim

The City presented itself throughout the planning process as a neutral arbiter and champion of the public interest.

I love to hear what people really dream of, what they really want and see if we can actually tailor a project to reflect that. But then, being a City official, I have to also look at the broad needs of the city, and what does the City need as a whole—whether it's more jobs, more housing, more economic development, increase value of property...and so I have to look at that as well and try to balance citywide needs with those very engaged community based desires and aspirations.<sup>578</sup>

The administration's assertion of neutrality is grounded on an equation between the public interest and economic growth. According to this logic, land use policy should unlock the unrealized value of "underdeveloped" neighborhoods so as to improve general prosperity through an increase in wealth.

Oh, and the taxes from all the housing that's gonna be there. The population growth that we can accommodate there. The retail. Not just the tourists. I think this could be one of the most impactful projects we do in New York outside of Manhattan.<sup>579</sup>

Well, at the very fundamental level, the City's economic development policy is to increase tax revenues and increase employment in the city. And so one of the things that the Bloomberg administration has done since it has come into office is to look around at various areas that are under-developed, areas where we think that there is potential to increase employment, potential to increase tax revenue to the city, and in certain instances to try to revive other economic development engines and Coney Island is a perfect example of that third category where you both have the underdevelopment and a great need for jobs and an opportunity to generate new tax revenue.<sup>580</sup>

The connection drawn by the City between economic growth and the public interest allows little room to consider a public dimension beyond the economic domain. This

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<sup>578</sup> Ibid.

<sup>579</sup> Robert Lieber, interview by Amy Nicholson, July 7, 2009.

<sup>580</sup> Seth Pinsky, interview by Amy Nicholson. March 18, 2009.

makes it hard for the City to justify public investment in projects that do not promise to yield quantifiable financial return. Lynn Kelly, for instance, did not see why the City should support the amusement area absent the large-scale projects envisioned as the economic centerpiece of the redevelopment plan.

If the zoning doesn't go through, then why buy the parkland? I mean, it goes hand in hand. I mean, we're committed to doing an amusement area, and we feel a key part to doing this amusement area is knowing that the City can control the destiny and ensure that amusements will be there. If the zoning doesn't go through, it's like what incentive does it give the City to spend taxpayer money to preserve this resource.<sup>581</sup>

The City's growth strategy involves a development approach that combines a series of incentives, such as upzonings, other in-kind subsidies, and monetary subsidies, to attract private investment. These incentives reduce a developer's fixed costs and, in the case of upzonings, his fixed costs as a proportion of total costs, thereby rendering projects less risky. Deputy Mayor Doctoroff and Mayor Bloomberg have described the administration's approach succinctly:

It's an approach to growth that is giving confidence to people who are willing to make an investment. The administration's approach is for the public sector to set the table, to create the conditions that enable the private sector to *do what it does best*.<sup>582</sup> (emphasis added)

This is a strategy that we've used all across the city. Rezone, reinvest, and reap the long-term rewards of private investment.<sup>583</sup>

The administration's strategy offers several advantages. It limits the City's exposure, letting private developers assume the greater portion of the development costs and

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<sup>581</sup> Lynn Kelly, interview by Amy Nicholson, April 14, 2009.

<sup>582</sup> Dan Doctoroff, as quoted in Lombino 2005.

<sup>583</sup> Michael Bloomberg, Mayoral Press Conference to announce acquisition of Thor Equities property, November 12, 2009, as filmed in Nicholson 2012.

therefore of the risk. It also allows the private sector “to do what is does best,” which presumably entails gauging and meeting market demand.

A reliance on subsidized private development as an avenue for economic growth corroborates in two ways the City’s neutral pursuit of the public interest. First, the emphasis on growth, construed as a generalized increase in collective prosperity, glosses over distributional questions. Second, delegating to the private sector the task of identifying and fulfilling public preferences bypasses the process of political deliberation in favor of the impersonal mechanism of the market. Notwithstanding its apparent impartiality, the City’s approach reflects a particular set of assumptions, favors certain forms of development, and tends to allocate risks, benefits, and burdens in specific ways. These biases have as sources, first, the reification of the “economic” and second, the stipulation of growth as a planning objective and the reliance on public-private arrangement as the method for its pursuit.

### ***The Economic***

The focus on the “economy” as a policy arena dislodges a set of practices—the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services—from their social and cultural context, removing from consideration the vast array of “non-economic” activity that makes these practices possible, cordoning off the influence of power and wealth in the performance of these practices, and privileging economic indexes over a general assessment of wellbeing. In Coney Island, the emphasis on “economic” growth directed analysis toward questions concerning job numbers, direct spending amounts, investment, and tax revenues and away from questions dealing with: the collective determination of development goals; the distribution of development costs and benefits; or the myriad elements and people that enhance

neighborhood qualities. Furthermore, because economic analysis depends on market data, it only accounts for values that find expression in the market (i.e. market values). “Market,” however, like “economy,” denotes a framework of analysis, not an inherent attribute. The line that divides market value from non-market values depends on a variety of considerations, several of which concern the limits of quantifiability and monetization. These limits can be epistemological (what we can’t count; e.g., the value of spiritual faith), political (what we choose not to count; e.g., the cost of second-hand smoke), or normative (what we choose not to monetize; e.g., the value of babies). Economic analysis disregards these distinctions, and simply treats the market as a reflection of all value. It takes into account only activity that registers as “economic,” leaving all else outside of the field of consideration.

In Coney Island, opening a hotel, for instance, would have been certified as a valuable economic activity by, among other tools, input-output models that, based on industry standards for that category of use, estimate the number of jobs and direct spending generated by such a project. A contribution to Coney Island like Dick Zigun’s, on the other hand, would hardly move the economic needle. His reimagining of local history and rekindling of indigenous artistic traditions probably helped in some measure transform and spread the neighborhood’s reputation, luring new visitors. But Zigun’s economic impact would be evaluated only in terms of the business activity transacted within Coney Island USA and not in terms of benefits that have accrued throughout the district as a result (one hard to quantify and attribute) of his efforts.

### ***Urban Redevelopment and Growth***

The objective of economic *growth* entails either an increase in outside investment or increase in efficiency. In practice, the City's development approach centers almost exclusively on the former. Its formula is premised on the addition of new, large-scale projects, and only secondarily, if at all, on the improvement of existing operations. The City's plans are therefore mainly addressed at outside developers, making a concerted effort, as they did in Coney Island, to simplify and render attractive the possibility of undertaking development projects in the neighborhood.

[Astroland owner Carol] Albert, [local historian Charles Denson] said, tried to get a revitalized Astroland incorporated into the City's rezoning plans before selling out to Thor, but was rebuffed in favor of a wholesale redevelopment proposal for the entire neighborhood. "The City didn't just come in and say, 'Let's fix the vacant lots.' They do this scorched earth policy" (deMause 2008e).

The public-private development approach favored by the City reflects a series of tendencies and assumptions regarding the allocation of risk and incentives. City subsidies are a way for the City to assume a portion of the cost (and therefore risk) of a project so as to reduce that of developers. Subsidies may include any combination of upzoning, tax credits, infrastructure investment, or financial subsidies (as well as the additional costs associated with greater density, which are borne in part by everyone who frequents the neighborhood). In practice, however, these incentives do not necessarily transfer over to developers and induce development. Their value can just as easily be captured by landowners and incorporated into the price of their land. In those circumstances, the City's measures reward predominantly a class of individuals consisting of: longtime landowners, whoever had the foresight to acquire land before the City's intervention, and especially those who, having acquired land, can exert enough political influence to

determine the City's incentives. Once the development incentives are reflected in the price of land, the risks of development remain mostly as they were before, set primarily by real estate market conditions.

This is precisely how the City's development strategy played out in Coney Island. The anticipated benefits of the City's efforts were reaped by the original landowners who sold at speculative prices to Thor Equities and by Thor Equities itself, which owned most of the land at the time of the upzoning and which used its political connection to Recchia to shape the final terms of the plan. The land values increased about tenfold between the year of the CIDC's formation and the City's acquisition of Thor's land.<sup>584</sup> Once the land in the amusement area reflected the value of the City's incentives, the advisability of proceeding with an actual development project hinged on the market, much as it ever did. This explains the virtual absence of construction on private land since the rezoning. In the 2009 press conference that announced the public purchase of Thor's land, Mayor Bloomberg announced that "to encourage Thor Equities to start developing the hotels and stores it plan[ned] to build in its remaining land along Surf Avenue, [the] administration [would be] investing more than \$150 m to improve Coney Island's infrastructure, with millions more coming in federal and state aid."<sup>585</sup> As of 2016, no hotels of 30 stories or otherwise have been built along Surf Avenue. The only development activity in Thor's remaining land has consisted of the demolition of three early twentieth

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<sup>584</sup> While land prices in the amusement area certainly escalated greatly during this period, the circumstances surrounding the acquisition by the City—the only land acquisition that immediately followed the rezoning—make it impossible to determine exactly by how much. First, the parties to the transaction included the City, whose incentives and objectives differ from those of a private actor. And secondly, the land price is likely to have been settled in connection to the negotiations that surrounded the rezoning. As a result, the price may have reflected concessions granted or obtained during that process.

<sup>585</sup> Michael Bloomberg, Mayoral Press Conference to announce acquisition of Thor Equities property, November 12, 2009, as filmed in Nicholson 2012.

century buildings and the construction a single story structure, a glass boxy building on the corner of Stillwell Avenue that houses the chain candy store “It’s Sugar.”



**Figure 53: Site of former Henderson's Building.**

### ***Urban Redevelopment and Risk***

The fact that the City’s development incentives have yet to produce the intended results does not mean that they did not have an effect on the risk of undertaking development activities in the neighborhood. In several ways, they augmented it. First, the expectation of an upzoning increased the risk of doing business in the amusement area. The City’s early declaration of interest in the redevelopment of Coney Island set off a wave of real estate speculation, spurred on either by a sense that the City would follow its typical redevelopment approach or by a conviction

that its approach could be politically influenced for gain. Land transactions at speculative prices soon led to the displacement of most businesses within the district. The ensuing disruptions and the protracted uncertainty about the particulars of the City's plan then deterred the opening of new businesses and the expansion of remaining ones. Operators of seasonal amusements, for one, worried about the viability of their attractions in an up-zoned, year-round Coney Island and deferred any unnecessary capital investment. The seasons that preceded the City's involvement had each seen a handful of new attractions. The years that followed saw hardly any at all.

We were going to buy a new spinning coaster—I loved that ride—[before Thor's arrival. But] you can't support a payroll of 350 people surrounded by a construction site.<sup>586</sup>

Second, the City's incentives also discouraged brand new development by rendering unfeasible modest projects that might have been viable under the former, more restrictive zoning regime. Once land prices soared in anticipation of, and in response to, the upzoning, only larger, ambitious, and riskier projects made economic sense. And those types of projects depend on propitious market conditions that have not arisen in Coney Island since the time of the rezoning. Consequently, the vacant lots slated for higher-density development have remained vacant. The administration, however, does not necessarily find these vacancies problematic, because it views redevelopment as a long-term endeavor that eventually comes to fruition despite market downturns—the busts in the boom-and-bust cycles that the City's own subsidies accentuate.

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<sup>586</sup> Astroland owner Carol Albert as quoted in deMause 2007a.

The trick with these kinds of projects is to have a long-term view and to make sure your plan gives you the ability to accommodate these types of downturns. This is actually a good time because it doesn't cost you as much because there's not as much crowding out, you know from the private sector for costs. And the infrastructure you put in place today positions you well when the markets do recover so that when you want to build vertical, you'll be able to do so.

Not everyone, though, shares the City's time-horizon. The disruptions, displacements, and vacancies that the City sees as incidental and transitory can have a transformative and detrimental effect on the neighborhood for those who use it regularly. In this respect, the City's development incentives can both fail to mitigate private developer risk and impose a risk on local communities.

### ***"What It Does Best"***

Another set of assumptions underlying the City's public-private approach to redevelopment concerns the efficacy of the private sector as a vehicle for advancing the public interest. The City prefers to take on a limited role in the implementation of its redevelopment plans. Having created favorable conditions for projects to happen, it would rather sit back and, in the words of Deputy Mayor Doctoroff, let the private sector do what it does best. This deference arises from a sense that private developers have a stronger incentive than the City to navigate the vicissitudes of the market, and that they have therefore developed, notwithstanding their irrationalities and boom-bust proclivities (Fainstein 2001; Weber 2015), a greater expertise for doing so. They have, in other words, a strong profit incentive to discern market demand and give people what they want.

There are several problems with the logic that casts the private sector as a neutral, market-guided force for the advancement of the public interest. First, private

developers are in the business of making money off popular preferences, not in the business of satisfying those preferences. They therefore concern themselves exclusively with the preferences or values that they can monetize and have little motivation to bother with those that they cannot. Second, developer interest in monetizable preferences is not in the service of their fulfillment, but in the service of profitability. This means that the preferences of those with greater collective means (due to a function of wealth and numbers) take priority over others; and it also means that even those preferences will be addressed only after consideration of the perceived benefits, costs, and risk of doing so.

There is a discrepancy, then, between value preferences and their market expression, as refracted by the calculus of profitability. This disconnect widens when one considers that preferences concerning the future of a neighborhood arise from political deliberation and not from the aggregation of discrete consumer demands lying dormant and awaiting satisfaction. Development can achieve market success in disregard or even at the expense of unrealized value preferences; and it can also fulfill value preferences without achieving market success. Various development decisions in Coney Island, especially those that triggered public outcries, illustrate the conflict between market assessments and popular will. Before the 2011 season, for example, Zamperla decided to deny lease renewals to most of the Boardwalk businesses and replace them with a Nathan's franchise, establishments run by Sodexo, and a restaurant complex to be developed by Michele Merlo (Del Signore 2011), the manager of the Miami Beach Pelican Hotel. Perhaps Zamperla calculated that the scale of the new operations would allow the new tenants to pay higher rents. Perhaps, based on experience, it thought the new

restaurant/retail formula would better cater to the new crowds it wanted to draw. Whatever the case, at least a portion of the public disagreed with Zamperla's decision and valued the old establishments over the new ones (a value difference that Zamperla either felt unable to monetize or regarded as inadequate in relation to other business considerations).

Public protests concerning development projects amount to an expression of the distance between market value and political desire. We have seen that the City's favored redevelopment approach, far from impartially advancing the public interest, tends to benefit some (landowners, speculators, certain consumers) and to impose a burden on others (existing businesses, people who frequent the neighborhood, those whose preferences do not translate into dominant market signals). The City's own zoning restrictions constitute a tacit admission that private development left unregulated will fail to address at least some important public demands. Nonetheless, the City prefers to keep its regulations broad—just enough to ostensibly safeguard the public interest, but not so onerous that they prevent the private sector from deploying its market expertise. In Coney Island, SCI disagreed with this formula and faulted the City for its failure to adequately protect the public dimension of neighborhood.

### **SCI's Normative Claim**

SCI's platform implied a public claim that challenged both the City's understanding of the public interest and its strategy for the pursuit of that interest. The advocates asserted a type of public right to the neighborhood. This right conflicted with the private property rights that serve as a foundation for the City's redevelopment plan,

and it would have given the public greater control over the shape of future private development.

My take on the matter is this, Coney Island belongs to the people of New York City that care to use it. It does not belong to the developers. It does not belong to the tourists. If they wish to come to our Coney Island and experience all of Coney Island, fine, but keep Coney Island for who it belongs to—the little people of the city. Leave them a place that they can have a good time.<sup>587</sup>

It would be nice if somehow the process could be a little more democratic, so that a vote is taken, or something. “Oh, well, the majority says the building’s got to go,” rather than one person. But of course that’s not how society is. There’s an owner of the building. But if some of the buildings were given landmark status, it would have been nice.<sup>588</sup>

This claim of public ownership arose from a sense that Coney Island’s history resonates well beyond the confines of the neighborhood and renders the amusement area unique and significant to a wide range of people.

Interviewee: I think the City tried to play down what made Coney Island unique, which was the amusements. I don’t care, all those people who live out there, if they don’t have an appreciation for the history of the amusement area, then shame on them. You know? Shame on them. Because without those rides, Coney Island would just be like Rockaway. But not even Rockaway. It would just be like any other neighborhood.

Author: Why is it important to preserve that history?

Interviewee: Because it’s a wonderful thing. It’s something that brings joy to people. It’s something that’s unique, you know.<sup>589</sup>

Members of SCI portrayed the amusement area as a matter of public concern by connecting local history to two types of narratives. The first dealt with the role of collective recreation and amusements in the development of Brooklyn, the city, and the country, making the case for the broad significance of the neighborhood’s

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<sup>587</sup> Interview with advocate, June 5, 2013.

<sup>588</sup> Interview with advocate, February 1, 2013.

<sup>589</sup> Interview with advocate, August 21, 2012.

history. The second was a narrative of inclusion that emphasized the neighborhood's historic diversity and public functions. Here, the advocates did not draw on local history, as often happens, to reinforce a group identity or to lay an exclusive right to a place as, in this case, Brooklynites or as New Yorkers. On the contrary, they drew on it to reaffirm a tradition of inclusive public recreation. Coney Island's history may have served as a source of patriotism and Brooklyn pride for some advocates,<sup>590</sup> but even then, it was not used as grounds for exclusion. Instead, it inspired feelings of patriotism because it celebrated ideals of collective participation that form part of a New York and an American imaginary.

The historic narratives that supported the advocates' claims about Coney Island's public character were reflected in, and reinforced by, a number of neighborhood features. In the advocates' telling, these included, first of all, the neighborhood's accessibility and affordability. An ample selection of free and inexpensive attractions had long rendered the neighborhood a virtual public resource: seaside recreation available to anyone for the price of a subway fare. Second, the neighborhood's unique and unexpected qualities, many of which had resulted from the participation of crowds and of diverse individuals who lend attractions and establishments a human face, underscored the essential role of the public in fostering a distinctive Coney Island experience. Third, physical vestiges helped locate the amusement area in the history of public recreation. And fourth, the engaged quality of Coney Island visits—the fact that a good deal of their appeal hinges on personal explorations—brought about an affective connection to the neighborhood and a sense that through discernment and effort visitors had made the neighborhood their own.

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<sup>590</sup> Interviews with advocates, August 6, 2012; August 2, 2012.

Together, these deep-rooted features strengthened the belief that, in important regards, Coney Island was, had been, and should continue to be a place for the public and by the public. The forward-looking part of this argument followed two lines of reasoning. The traditionalist line held that Coney Island should remain a “public” amusement area because it had always been so—a logic grounded more in representations and personal experience than in historical or legal fact.

Coney Island belongs to the people of New York, it always has and to me Coney Island has always been for the people of New York that didn't have the resources to go other places.<sup>591</sup>

The second line of reasoning followed a sort of Lockean labor theory of property whereby property rights result from the exertion of labor to improve the land. Echoing this principle, the people's right to Coney Island arose from their contribution to the amusement area and to its uniqueness. This rationale explains the advocates' support for neighborhood regulars, as well as their objection to City subsidies that benefited outsiders exclusively and often at the expense of longstanding locals.

I don't like the formula, this very top down, “Well, this neighborhood's ok now. But now we're going to come in top down, re-brand it as blighted, and pave over everything. Fuck off, everybody. Now we're going to do it this way and make it easier for our well-heeled friends who are in this business...” make it easier for them, and at a pace that is friendly to them, and not necessarily convenient or friendly to the people who put in the effort to build the neighborhood up as it was.<sup>592</sup>

From my perspective, having been out there for some odd 16 years, and being aware of the people that owned businesses, what was changed were

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<sup>591</sup> Interview with advocate, June 5, 2013.

<sup>592</sup> Interview with advocate, July 13, 2012.

the people. They took it away from certain people and gave [it] to somebody else.<sup>593</sup>

SCI's favored development strategies centered on the preservation and enhancement of features that enriched the neighborhood's public dimension. These were features that had long made Coney Island available and attractive for the co-production (by spectators and participants) of a distinctive recreational experience—an experience characterized by an active engagement with diversity, the authentic, and the extra-ordinary. The preservation efforts typically concerned establishments that, even when widely regarded as marginal and expendable, embodied or were conducive to these experiential qualities. This focus turned Ruby's, for example, into a preservation cause, notwithstanding its dilapidation.

With regard to new development, members of SCI favored two approaches. The first entailed large gestures that would restore the scale and grandeur of some of the old parks, strengthening the neighborhood's connection to its history and celebrating its function as a place for public recreation. Several advocates, for instance, called for the construction of something along the lines of the Steeplechase Pavilion. The second approach consisted of "organic" development—development that would evolve from existing uses that enhance the public dimension of the amusement area, without contributing to their wholesale displacement.

## **E. Final Thoughts**

The City and SCI's development visions implied two conflicting notions of rights. The City's relied as a point of departure on a variety of formalized rights (i.e.,

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<sup>593</sup> Interview with advocate, June 5, 2013.

property rights): the right to exclude, the right to use, the right to sell, etc. SCI's development vision, by contrast, presupposed a public right to the neighborhood that was neither formalized nor enforceable—except in the case of public land—and that, as we've seen, ran against private property rights. This type of public right depends on the City for its enforcement. And in the case of Coney Island, such enforcement fell far short of what SCI would have preferred. The City regarded its restraint as part of an effort to promote the public interest through private development. SCI, on the other hand, viewed it as an abdication of responsibility and further, as the sale of a public good for the enrichment of well-connected outsiders.

Anybody who went through the neighborhood, there was so many open lots and dilapidated buildings or whatever. It's like, "Would guys want a piece of the rides and amusement area?" Why? What gives you the right to think they deserve it? You don't. You got nothing to do with it. This is something that was left with the zoning for rides and amusement only for a point in time in the future when something seriously could have been done to revitalize and make Coney Island in some way shape or matter the grandeur it was in the past and then it all went out the window. I watched a bunch of butchers carving a carcass at that meeting [and] they couldn't care less about anything.<sup>594</sup>

Throughout this case study, I have explained a planning conflict over the terms of a redevelopment plan by tracing it back to a series of progressively foundational differences. These differences concerned development visions, understandings of a neighborhood, planning rationalities, and normative assumptions about what planning is for. The City's and SCI's perspectives both have merits and limitations. My intention, however, has been to elucidate the nature of their differences, not to adjudicate between them. That adjudication should have taken place throughout the planning process, but didn't. Instead, that process consisted mostly of adversarial

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<sup>594</sup> Interview with advocate, June 5, 2013.

exchanges and led to a predictable outcome: concessions to the powerful at the expense of the rest.

The call for more meaningful community engagement in the planning process has long been part of reform efforts to produce more equitable planning results. This appeal should assume greater urgency in light of increasingly prevalent critiques<sup>595</sup> about the rate and scale of neighborhood change, about the enabling role of the City in those transformations, and about the (poor) quality of the development results.

Observing this process unfold across town, some advocates recalled an excitement and vitality that they had once enjoyed in many corners of the city and expressed a desire to make those experiences available to future generations.<sup>596</sup> Instead, they felt themselves and others increasingly pushed out of neighborhoods and kept finding meaningful “public” space sacrificed in the name of someone else’s notion of a higher and better use.

It tells you what’s valued. They make it so difficult [for the little people]. It’s made so easy for the developers. They come up with this grand, generic vision that they want to impose, and they’re giving public subsidies to do it. And ultimately, when it’s built, can the public participate? Can the public afford it?<sup>597</sup>

Each time something goes away in this city, and I’m not saying that nothing should ever be torn down, and there shouldn’t be new things.... every time there’s a loss of a beloved place, people are check[ing off a list]. There are fewer of them. [People] talk about how their world was shrinking. People felt that they were losing what belonged to the public, what belonged to the people of New York was being taken away from them; and was going to be replaced by something that was less valuable to them, and more expensive to them.<sup>598</sup>

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<sup>595</sup> Hammett and Hammet 2007; Jeremiah’s Vanishing New York (blog); Anasi 2012.

<sup>596</sup> Interviews with advocates, June 5, 2013; August 17, 2012; August 22, 2012.

<sup>597</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

<sup>598</sup> Interview with advocate, August 7, 2012.

I think that something that's an icon in the city, when there is an opportunity and space opens up, I just wish there was a sense of philanthropy still... [that they would] grant a portion of it for the public. They salivate too much, these developers when something like that opens up, and they get their deal pushed through. But, it would be great if there was some portion of an iconic building like that that the public could go in, and marvel out, and enjoy.<sup>599</sup>

These last comments referred, in turn, to mega-projects, to the closing of an old bar in Manhattan's meatpacking district (i.e., Florent) and to the conversion of the iconic Woolworth Building into private condominiums. But they might have easily been referring to any neighborhood, iconic or not, rendered significant through people's lives. It is tempting to reject evocations of a more vital past and lamentations of neighborhood loss by attributing them, respectively, as the City did, to nostalgia and to an aversion to change. This glib attribution, however, does not provide grounds for rejection. It merely sets the stage for an investigation never undertaken in the case of Coney Island—an investigation into the uses and meaning of "nostalgia" and into the attachments that underlie that resistance to change. This investigation might have considered how the public relates to "private" space and why they lay claim to it. It might have also considered how meaning shapes the complex relation between the form and use of a place, enabling seemingly marginal structures to link the contemporary experience of a neighborhood to a cherished construction of its past. The City's inclination to treat public preferences primarily as a black box that is only knowable through either market signals or concrete negotiation demands yielded little insight into the origins of these preferences and therefore offered limited guidance on how or whether to address them. This resulted in an impoverished view of people's relation to places and of their struggle to shape the city according to their desires.

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<sup>599</sup> Interview with advocate, August 22, 2012.

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## XX. Figure, Map, and Table Sources

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## XXI. Appendixes

### Appendix A

#### *Coney Island in History*

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### Appendix B

#### *Local Newspapers and Blogs*

- New York Times
- New York Observer
- New York Post
- New York Daily News
- New York Magazine
- The Village Voice

- Amusing the Zillion
- Noticing New York
- Gowanus Lounge
- Gothamist
- Vanishing New York
- Kinetic Carnival
- Brownstoner

## Appendix C

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## Appendix D

### *Interview Protocol*

I'm interested in the redevelopment of Coney Island; but I first want to talk a little about your relationship to Coney Island.

#### Relation to Coney Island

- What is your relation to Coney Island? What space does it fit in your life?
- How did you first hear of Coney Island? (What books and movies?)
- What was your first impression of it?
- How often do you go there?

#### Image and Experience of Coney Island

- What attracts you to Coney Island?
- What do/did you do there?
- Tell me about your most memorable experience there?
- If you wanted someone to understand Coney Island, where would you take them? and what stories would you tell them if they, asked "what's so special about it"?

#### Conditions in Coney Island

- Do you remember what Coney was like in the early to mid 00s? What captures for you what Coney was like then?
- Were there aspects of the amusement area that you would have improved? Preserved?

### Development of Coney Island and Planning Process

- When did you first hear of the City's plan?
- Can you describe it in a nutshell? What was it about? What were its goals?
- What did you think of it?
- Why did you become involved in the public review process?
- What is that process like? What was your impression of it? What is people's role in it?
- How did you participate?
- What captures for you what Coney was like during this process?
- Did your involvement change your views of Coney Island?

### Outcomes

- For you, what are the most important that have changed in Coney since the rezoning? Can you describe in a nutshell what it's like now?
- Do you still go there?
- What do you think of Coney Island now?
- Do you miss anything about former Coney Islands?
- Can any of that be recovered? How would you improve it?