

Coney Island: Planning Nostalgic Space

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I. Introduction

In the past several decades, cities have paid increasing attention to tourism as a strategy for economic development. To that end, they have invested substantial public funds in developing tourism infrastructure and in marketing themselves as destinations. Proponents of this strategy argue that tourism uses induce new economic activity that ripples throughout the city, expanding the size of the local economy and creating new jobs. They further contend that tourism redevelopment brings infrastructure improvements and recreational opportunities that serve both residents and visitors. Critics, however, counter that the economic benefits of tourism projects are largely overstated—that they produce only low-paying jobs and fail to improve the economic plight of poorer neighborhoods. Some critics also maintain that these projects create enclaves of middle-class consumption that rend the urban fabric of a city and reinforce the economic and spatial stratification of its city residents. Others argue that tourism redevelopment produces a generic product that gradually erodes local vernaculars and erases unique aspects of the physical landscape of cities. They point to similarities in the types of projects that are undertaken (e.g., stadiums, convention centers, festival malls, casinos, etc.), as well as to their respective homogeneous features. Some of these projects do adopt historic themes that try to highlight the distinctiveness of a city by calling attention to its local heritage. These efforts, however, are often criticized for their lack of authenticity and for their reliance on a limited set of architectural clichés. Despite all these objections, tourism redevelopment still offers the promise of economic growth and the immediacy of often dramatic physical improvements—factors that continue to draw enthusiastic support from public officials, developers, and portions of the public. Consequently, this strategy has continued to transform the face of contemporary American cities.

Coney Island, a five-mile strip on the southern tip of Brooklyn, was once one of the most famous amusement resorts and tourist attractions in the world. During the first decades of the 20th Century, Coney Island played an important role in the emergence of a mass culture of public recreation. It offered a public forum available, to an unprecedented extent, to most classes and ethnicities. It also granted a temporary reprieve from certain enduring 19th Century social conventions that governed public interaction between young, unmarried men and women. This relaxation of social boundaries was encouraged by the area's countless attractions. The most extravagant and famous of these were Coney Island's three major amusement parks—Steeplechase Park, Luna Park, and Dreamland. These enormously popular parks became synonymous with Coney Island, and set the standard for the many enclosed amusement parks that

followed during subsequent years. Numerous socio-economic factors contributed to the gradual decline of the economic fortunes of Coney Island and to the closure of many of its attractions. However, although the area had lost its novelty and glamour by the 1930s, it remained enormously popular through the 1940s, particularly among working-class residents.

Popularity, however, could not stave off the decline of Coney Island. As economic conditions in the area continued to deteriorate during the 1950s, the City drew up plans to devote large sections of the neighborhood to high-density residential uses. The implementation of these plans created concentrated pockets of poverty in parts of the neighborhood—pockets that would become hotbeds of crime, arson, and racial unrest during the late 1960s and 1970s. The City's fiscal crisis during this period aggravated matters further, as budgetary cuts led to a decline in public services and police presence. Many of the residents who had the means to leave the neighborhood, did; and Coney Island, a place once synonymous with urban amusement, came to symbolize urban decay. This social crisis gradually abated as conditions throughout the City improved during the 1980s and 1990s. No major projects, however, were undertaken in Coney Island during these years. Nonetheless, the area's remaining amusements continued their modestly popular operations under the enormous shadow of Coney Island's reputation.

The past three decades have witnessed a variety of efforts to revitalize Coney Island and attract more visitors and tourists to the area. Private and public proposals have included a casino gambling park, an enormous amusement complex, and a sports arena. However, neither these nor any other major project came to fruition until the end of the 1990s, when a series of events led to the first two major local redevelopment efforts since the 1960s. The first of these was a publicly financed minor league stadium, built, despite strong opposition from various parties, as the cornerstone of the redevelopment of Coney Island. The stadium opened its gates in the summer of 2001. The second initiative by the City was the creation of the Coney Island Development Corporation (CIDC), a local development corporation (LDC) charged with putting together a master plan for the area. Shortly after its formation in 2003, the CIDC issued a request for proposals (RFP) in order to select the consultant team that would develop this master plan. The RFP set forth a number of goals meant to guide the consultant's efforts, which were scheduled to conclude by mid-2004.

This study evaluates both of these initiatives as strategies for the economic development of Coney Island. I undertake this evaluation from the perspectives of both economic growth and social

justice. Thus, beyond considering economic benefits and costs, my analysis examines the applicability to Coney Island of the various criticisms generally levied against tourism redevelopment. As discussed above, these relate to questions of stratification, exclusion, standardization, and authenticity. With respect to the stadium, which has been operational for several years, I focus on the planning process that led to its construction and on the impacts of its operation. With regard to the CIDC, which began its efforts only a few months ago, I focus on its composition and on the goals by which it has defined the problems of Coney Island and laid a tentative roadmap for the redevelopment of the area. The central questions guiding my evaluation are: Who benefits? Who pays? And who has a say? These questions examine the extent to which the redevelopment conforms to democratic processes and yields democratic results. They also implicate the fundamental political consideration of who *should* have a say in the determination of Coney Island's future.