

gradually tempered by a preference for discrete consumption and domestic recreation.<sup>135</sup>

Disneyland catered to its patrons accordingly. Visitors to any Disney park arrive separately at enormous parking lots before being transported to the facility itself. The parks' price of admission and physical isolation insure a great degree of homogeneity among visitors, something that facilitates the provision of a highly predictable and non-threatening recreational event. In this way, Disney has sought to keep at bay the heterogeneous urban qualities with which Coney Island has always been associated. Descriptions of Coney Island frequently contain words like "seedy", "weird", "interesting"—words seldom used to describe its corporate spiritual successor.

Finally, Coney Island has been defined by a rhetoric of urban decline that is often deployed to promote development. This rhetoric tends to flatten Coney Island and frame discussions about the neighborhood in the bi-polar terms of investment and divestment. However, since narratives of decline must unfold across a period of time, these discussions summon historical meanings tailored to illustrate Coney Island's downward trajectory. Thus, they allude to Coney Island's past glory and popularity in order to document its decline and promote plans for its revival.

### **Coney Island Today**

Today, Coney Island looks much like it did thirty years ago. In the past five or so years, however, the neighborhood has become the focus of a number of redevelopment efforts. Two of these, Keyspan Park and the CIDC will be discussed at length in subsequent chapters. In addition to these two, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is undertaking a long overdue \$240 million reconstruction of Stillwell Avenue Terminal, Coney Island's main subway station; and the New York City Aquarium is planning a \$45 million capital improvement program. This section describes the physical landscape of Coney Island and the redevelopment opportunities that the neighborhood currently offers.

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<sup>135</sup> Nasaw, 1993. p.255.



Figure 4.7. Gray areas indicate vacant lots. Outline demarcates the amusement district. (Baldock,2003. p.77)

### **Zoning/Land Use**

The amusement district stretches over two miles along Coney Island's Boardwalk. It comprises the area bounded by West 5<sup>th</sup> Street, West 24<sup>th</sup> Street, Surf Avenue, and the Boardwalk, as well the southern part of the blocks bounded by West 8<sup>th</sup> Street, West 17<sup>th</sup> Street, and Surf and Mermaid Avenue (See Figure 4.7). The district contains over 83 amusement attractions, the majority of which are located on its eastern side, between West 5<sup>th</sup> and Stillwell Avenues.<sup>136</sup> Most of the amusement attractions remain in operation only from April to August, giving the area a rather desolate air during the off-season. The area west of Stillwell Avenue remains largely vacant, as does most of the commercial strip along Surf Avenue. The empty lots along these corridors belong to multiple owners, something that may complicate transactions with potential purchasers interested in stretches of land that comprise several parcels. The district is surrounded by residential neighborhoods, parts of which are low-density, and parts of which bear the deep scars of the urban renewal efforts inflicted on them during middle of the 20th Century.

The district is zoned C7, a low-density zoning designation that encourages outdoor amusements and prohibits residential and community uses (See Figure 4.8).<sup>137</sup> The allowed commercial uses are limited to those regarded as compatible with the amusement character of the area.<sup>138</sup> The C7 zone allows a floor area ratio (FAR) of 2. Such a low FAR prevents out-of-scale development that may cast long large shadows over parts of the amusement area. However, it also limits the

<sup>136</sup> Baldock, 2003. p.77.

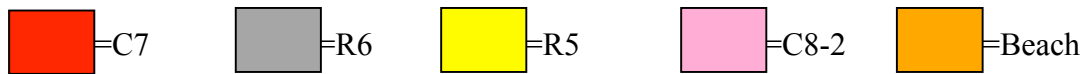
<sup>137</sup> NYC Dpt. Of City Planning, 1990. p.88.

<sup>138</sup> Zoning Resolution of the City of New York, Sections 32-21, 32-22, 32-23, 32-24.

profitability of new development within the district, which may perhaps explain why vacant parcels in the area have remained undeveloped for so long.<sup>139</sup>



Figure 4.8. Zoning and Land use of Coney Island Amusement District (Baldock,2003. p.71.)



*North of Surf Avenue*

North of Surf Avenue, the majority of the parcels between West 17<sup>th</sup> Street and Stillwell Avenue remain either underused or, to all appearances, vacant. The two western blocks are occupied mainly by parking lots; and the third, by buildings that, if occupied, are not in compliance with the district’s land use requirements. This much is clear; none of the uses in these blocks complement in any way the amusement district within whose boundaries they are located.

Between Stillwell Avenue and West 12<sup>th</sup> Street sits the subway station, whose transformation into a state-of-the-art facility should conclude before the 2005 season. During most of the period of construction, subway service to Coney Island will be limited to one line. By the 2004 season, however, the full four-line service will be restored. The project will reconstruct the stations’ tracks and platforms, and replace its current one story building with a much larger three story one. The new building will feature improved waiting areas, a McDonalds, new public bathrooms, and

<sup>139</sup> Baldock, 2003, p.9.

the old building's historic terra cotta façade, cleaned, repaired, and reconstructed. The most remarkable component of the station, however, will be its wing-like glass and steel canopies, which will include solar panels capable of generating enough electric power for the cooling and heating needs of the building.<sup>140</sup>

The long block between West 12<sup>th</sup> and West 8<sup>th</sup> Street contains the venerable B&B Carousel, which has operated in Coney Island since 1939. These days, the carousel is run by Jimmy McCullough, a descendant of George Tilyou.<sup>141</sup> The rest of the block, however, is occupied by non-complying uses, such as furniture stores and flea markets. Members of the amusement community have expressed a desire for the enforcement of land use regulations and for the elimination of these uses.<sup>142</sup>

### *From Surf Avenue to the Boardwalk between Stillwell Avenue and West 5<sup>th</sup> Street*

This area comprises the current heart of the amusement district, and it contains the area's two main amusement parks, numerous independent rides, as well as a variety of arcades, concessions, shooting galleries, bars, and restaurants. The renowned Bowery, which starts at Jones Walk and runs west between Surf Avenue and the Boardwalk, still bustles with amusement related attractions that, like most in the district, attract minorities and low-income crowds. In addition to these attractions, the block between Stillwell and West 12<sup>th</sup> Street contains on its northeast corner the home of CI USA, the Coney Island Museum, and Sideshow by the Sea. The museum is one of the few attractions in the area open throughout the year. During the summer, in addition to the Sideshow, CI USA organizes numerous events, such as short film festivals, Coney Island lectures, musical performances, burlesque shows, and of course, the Mermaid Parade.

The subsequent block heading east includes the second largest amusement park in the district, Deno's Wonder Wheel and Kiddie Park. The park, which does not charge for admission, caters to families, and features twenty-five rides for adults and children. Most prominent among these is the landmarked Wonder Wheel, a majestic 150 feet tall Ferris wheel dating back to the 1920s that carries over 200,000 people each year (See Figure 4.9).<sup>143</sup> The park also organizes special events, such as karaoke concerts and sand sculpting contests.

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<sup>140</sup> Mitchell, May 2002.

<sup>141</sup> Denson, 2002. p.251; Denson, 1998.

<sup>142</sup> Astella Development Corporation, 2002.

<sup>143</sup> Denson, 2002. p.57; Deno's Wonder Wheel and Kiddie Park website: <http://www.wonderwheel.com>



Figure 4.9. The Wonder Wheel and the boardwalk (Denson, 2002. p.266.)

The block between Jones Walk and West 10<sup>th</sup> Street contains Coney Island's largest amusement park, and arguably the anchor of the entire amusement district, Astroland. Astroland, which also does not charge admission, has over twenty rides for adults and children, as well as numerous games of skill and arcades. Notable among them is the Astrotower, a round, rotating, glass-enclosed compartment which takes passengers to the top of a 270 foot tower. The park also organizes numerous events, including a weekly cabaret, an annual circus show, and free Friday night fireworks displays (co-sponsored by Deno's Wonder Wheel). The biggest attraction of the park, however, is found across 10<sup>th</sup> Street,<sup>144</sup> the notorious and landmarked Cyclone:

A ride on the Cyclone is a greater thrill than flying an airplane at top speed.  
- Charles Lindbergh<sup>145</sup>

I feel sick.  
- First words uttered by Emilio Franco, who had been mute since birth, upon riding the Cyclone.<sup>146</sup>

Regarded as one of the most violent rollercoasters in the world, this wooden-tracked twister boasts unusually tight turns, steep descents, and purposely-engineered creaks and grinds to make the ride all the more stomach-wrenching.<sup>147</sup> The Cyclone barely avoided demolition in the mid-1970s during a hiatus in its operation. Although the Aquarium, residents of the neighboring Luna Park Homes, and even some amusement park owners clamored for its dismantlement, the local chamber of commerce and coaster enthusiasts prevailed, and today, the ride remains one of the most popular in Coney Island.<sup>148</sup>

The easternmost block in the amusement district contains the New York City Aquarium. At \$11 for adults and \$7 for children, the Aquarium's price of admission substantially exceeds that of most Coney Island attractions. The Aquarium, however does offer a large collection of aquatic life, and, unlike most of the rest of the district, it remains open year-round.<sup>149</sup> The Aquarium is

<sup>144</sup> 10<sup>th</sup> Street is a barely used corridor that Astroland owners have tried to close down in order to integrate their attractions. The City, however, has refused to do so (Denson, 2002. p.218).

<sup>145</sup> Immerso, 2002. p.162.

<sup>146</sup> Astroland website: <http://www.astroland.com/>

<sup>147</sup> Adams, 1991. p.17; Astroland website: <http://www.astroland.com/>

<sup>148</sup> Denson, 2002. p.148.

<sup>149</sup> New York City Aquarium website: <http://nyaquarium.com>

currently preparing to undergo major capital improvements. Dissatisfied with its attendance figures, the Aquarium hopes to increase its appeal to tourists, who currently make up only 3% of its visitors. One of the preliminary components of the Aquarium's plan is a reconstruction of the old Iron Pier to serve as a terminal for a ferry service to Downtown Manhattan.<sup>150</sup> According to a progress report presented to the community, the Aquarium also intends to overcome, ironically, the isolation from its surroundings—isolation that it once so deliberately sought. Obstacles to integrating the Aquarium include the partially spiked fence and below-grade construction that separate the facility from the Boardwalk and the ocean, as well as the sea of parking that renders pedestrian access from the remote Surf Avenue sidewalks an onerous endeavor.

*From Surf Avenue to the Boardwalk between West 24<sup>th</sup> Street and Stillwell Avenue*

With a few notable exceptions, most of these ten blocks are either vacant or devoted to parking. Furthest west, amidst an expanse of empty lots and parking, one finds pockets of non-complying uses. Among them are the Sea Crest Health Care Center and a warehouse building used by the New York City Human Resources Administration as a Medicaid and Job Center. This block also contains a NYC landmark, the old Childs Restaurant. This 1920s building, with its playful, maritime themed terracotta façade, seems currently vacant. Rumors have occasionally circulated of potential buyers interested in transforming it into a nightclub. The current owner, however, finds these plans absurd in light of the building's immediate surroundings, which he describes as “a ghetto.”<sup>151</sup>

The subsequent block is vacant; and the one after that contains a parking lot that, in the two hundred plus days of the year when the Keyspan Park is not being utilized, remains vacant as well—a vacancy that persists notwithstanding the presence in the southern portion of the lot of the contemptible Abe Stark Rink. Between West 19<sup>th</sup> and West 16<sup>th</sup> Street sits Keyspan Park, which, along with its immediate surroundings, I will discuss in greater depth in Chapter V. The following block also remains largely vacant save for the few remnants of Playland arcade. The one after that contains a large school bus parking lot in the portion of the lot facing West 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Facing Surf Avenue, it features an old-fashioned candy store, a clam bar, and Nathan's Famous, whose colorful signs enliven the area's otherwise desolate landscape. Facing Stillwell Avenue, the lot's southern parcels have contained several temporary amusement-related uses during the past seasons. Since 2002, this portion of the lot has featured a mini-golf course. West

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<sup>150</sup> Astella Development Corporation, 2002. pgs.47-48.

<sup>151</sup> Gray, July 21, 2002.

of Stillwell Avenue, the Bowery, which historically continued parallel to the Boardwalk up to Steeplechase Park on West 16<sup>th</sup> Street, now ends, vacant and bleak, at an empty lot on West 15<sup>th</sup> (See Figure 4.10).



Figure 4.10. Bowery entrance to Steeplechase Park circa 1903. Since 2001, the Bowery leads to a brick wall at the new Keyspan Park. (Denson,2002. p.247.)

### *The Boardwalk*

Commercial activity along the Boardwalk corresponds roughly with the distribution of attractions throughout the district. Thus, it clusters itself along the stretch that goes from the mini-golf course on Stillwell Avenue to Astroland on West 10<sup>th</sup> Street. Though the rest of the Boardwalk may at times bustle with joggers, casual strollers, and peculiar characters, hardly any discernible commercial activity takes place beyond this compact area. Boardwalk establishments include food concessions, bars, arcades, amusements, and souvenir shops. Notable among them are “Shoot the Freak”, a game that involves shooting paint balls at a live human target, and Ruby’s Old Thyme Bar and Restaurant, a neighborhood gathering place whose hundreds of Coney Island pictures and postcards offer glimpses of the resort’s rich history. This history appears to have influenced the proprietor and designer of Lola Staar, the small, pink souvenir shop next door. A relatively recent arrival on the Boardwalk, Lola Staar sells Coney Island collectibles and literature, as well as an original line of products inspired by Old Coney Island. Seemingly acclimated to the Boardwalk way, she advertises, with a seasoned show(wo)man’s calibrated pitch, that the store is, “even more colorfully shoppable and audaciously irresistible than [the] year [before]!”<sup>152</sup>— a gesture that perhaps has come to define so much of Coney Island’s trajectory, that of reaching towards its future, while refusing to let go of its past.

<sup>152</sup> Lola Staar website: <http://www.lolastaar.com/gossip.html>

### **Socioeconomics**

Coney Island's population shrank during the 1990s by 2%, while Brooklyn's population increased by 7.2%.<sup>153</sup> Just over half of all residents in the area are white, 17% are Hispanic, and 28% are black, a six point decrease since 1989.<sup>154</sup> The neighborhood remains poor relative to both Brooklyn and the City, and suffers from higher unemployment rates than either. In 1999, 17.2% percent of residents' incomes were less than half the poverty level, compared to 13.3% in Brooklyn. That same year, 12.9% of the labor force was unemployed, compared 10.7% in the Borough. Only 8.9% of Coney Island's workforce works within walking distance from home; only 3.7% of it works in the accommodation or food services; and only 1.3% works in arts, entertainment, and recreation. These three figures suggest that the amusement district employs only a very small percentage of local residents.

As in all of New York City, crime dropped significantly during the late 1990s.<sup>155</sup> However, it is still a problem, particularly within the area's low-income housing projects, which police have described as some of the toughest in the City.<sup>156</sup> There have been numerous gang-related violent crimes associated with the neighborhood housing projects during the past few years.<sup>157</sup> None of the major New York City newspapers, however, has reported instances of violence taking place in the amusement district, which suggests that this problem may be confined to certain residential neighborhoods within the area. Nonetheless, some proprietors complain that shoplifting and physical altercations occur with some regularity.

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<sup>153</sup> The demographic data is drawn from the analysis undertaken in *Astella: Coney Island Vision Plan*. Astella Development Corporation, 2002. The data was compiled from US Census figures for the following census tracts: 326, 328, 330, 336, 340, 342, 348.01, 348.02, 350, 352, 354, and 356.

<sup>154</sup> The Census Bureau does not regard Black and Hispanic as mutually exclusive ethnic categories.

<sup>155</sup> Farrell, 28 May, 2002.

<sup>156</sup> Newman, 10 February, 2004.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*; Schram, 31 January, 2003.