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Laying the Tracks for the Ghost Train



Photo: Mary Bowers

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Coney Island is no stranger to controversy. At the turn of the twentieth century, it was the infamous purveyor of pleasure; a crammed sandy beach that attracted over a million adult bathers and their excitable children; a boardwalk of amusements, screams and flashing lights above, lovers finding cozy nooks below; the bathhouses that exuded rumors of iniquities with their steam. The grinning face of Steeplechase Jack, Coney Island's unofficial mascot, was reminiscent of old Coney Island itself and the only remnant of one of its most famous amusement parks: brightly-colored, gaudy, and slightly sinister.

Now its empty lots and graffitied, abandoned amusements, scattered along Surf Avenue and the splintered boardwalk towards Brighton Beach, are the last dregs of Sodom-by-the-Sea. It is over these clusters of defunct land that a new debate rages; one that at the moment seems to have no clear resolution and no obvious frontrunner. Private speculator Joe Sitt would like to turn Coney Island into a Las Vegas-style amusement park, making his millions from high-rise condos; smaller speculators such as Taconic would rather Coney Island remain the franchised split it has always been. The City wants to create a holistic year-round attraction to lure excited tourists south of JFK airport. It is an ongoing dispute that either promises to save or threatens to destroy Coney Island, whose future is becoming as mysterious and unfathomable as its infamous Ghost Train.

On November 8 2007, City Mayor Michael Bloomberg addressed a crowd of reporters, anxious residents and community leaders at Garguilo's Restaurant on Surf Avenue. Each of them waited anxiously to hear the plans they expected would end over two years of petty argument and speculation; plans co-designed and approved by the Coney Island Development Corporation (CIDC). The mayor proposed buying out all speculators and creating 4,000-5,000 units of housing, 500,000 square feet of retail space and a large area of preserved parkland along the boardwalk which would include a huge new rollercoaster sweeping through the area, two skating rinks, hotels, a water park, shops and restaurants. The famous landmarked sites of the Parachute Jump, the old Cyclone Rollercoaster and Deno's Wonderwheel would remain, along with the B&B Carousel which was bought by the City for \$1.8 million two years ago and is in the process of restoration. They would stand as relics among the neon lights and structures steel and glass of the new development. The project would take between 10 and 20 years to complete and its estimated costs, of which the City remains tight-lipped, are expected to be in the billions. Yet it seems that the mayor's plans, expected to prove savior, instead has sparked war among investors.

Joe Sitt, chairman of Thor Equities, who has spent between \$100 million and \$200 million on land around the old amusement district, had earlier this year proffered plans for Las Vegas-style amusements, high rises and condos. He had been met with fierce opposition both by the local community and those he was lobbying for a favorable rezoning plan. Carol Hill Albert, owner of Astroland, two years ago sold her land to Sitt for \$30 million dollars, and provoked a wild public protest Labor Day weekend when a large crowd (mostly Manhattanites with their childhood memories) turned out to demand one more year of business. Sitt himself refused to comment on the meeting at Garguilo's except to release a statement which said he was "disappointed with the Mayor's presentation."

Most expect Joe Sitt will not sell. Some are suspicious of the cost to the City. Others, with their trust in the Mayor, see these as the plans Coney Island has been waiting for. Homeowners are worried about the effect of the developments on their property value, and Coney Island preservationists and nostalgic Manhattanites want to maintain the "honky-tonk" atmosphere of their childhood. Environmentalists urge caution. Locals need jobs. Businesses need profits. People everywhere want fun. Will parties reach a consensus with the new Coney Island, or will plans be pulled apart and empty lots remain?

Chuck Reichenthal, District Manager of Community Board 13, is strongly in support of Bloomberg's plans. Sitting in his offices in a ramshackle building, directly next to an empty lot with a chain link fence, he speaks with enthusiasm about the Mayor's speech. "Bloomberg's plan is open, and remains a place people can walk around," he says. "it is modern but it retains a honky-tonk feel." His support is echoed by Charles Denson, director of the Coney Island History Project, author of several books on the area, and a prominent voice in the Astroland protests. "This administration has done more to preserve Coney Island than any previous administration," he says in a phone interview from his winter home in Berkeley, California. He suggests the purchase of the B&B Carousel as a case in point. "Coney Island was endangered by speculators," he continues. "The fact that Bloomberg tried to stop him shows they might consider him [Joe Sitt] one of the worse developers they have ever seen." He is referring to the almost unanimous opposition to Thor amongst the preservation camp. Joe Sitt's fortune has been in retail development; he created the clothing chain Ashley Stewart, aimed at larger-sized African American women. Many of his subsequent retail ventures failed, and Coney Island will be his first amusement project. The sacred land of Coney Island, the likes of Reichenthal and Denson believe, will not be safe in his hands.

Confusion is bubbling under the local community's surface. It exploded on November 19 at an information session in Coney Island Hospital. The meeting, held by the Coney Island Development Corporation who were prepared for the 150 or so who replied to an RSVP request, was swamped by 300-400 bussed-in residents from Sheepshead Bay and Brighton Beach, all wearing bright yellow baseball caps reading, "Bloomberg's plan: How much? How long? Who pays?" The meeting was cancelled and the crowd dispersed by the NYPD among a flurry of camera crews and microphones. Many blamed councilman Dominic Recchia, and Senator Carl Kruger, who represents the surrounding area, for deliberately sabotaging the meeting. "Kruger came with busloads of elderly people," said local development director Eric Levy, who was present that evening. "Most of them had no idea why they were there." Kruger was unavailable for comment. Councilman Recchia, according to Levy, "really lost it" in front of the camera. "He was really busting a gut," Levy said. "He really went out of character."

The local community is bewildered and anxious, and Reichenthal blames it on a negative reaction from bureaucratic levels. "Right now there is enormous confusion," he says. "They were being pushed and shoved by a number of legislators who bussed in people who prevented scoping meetings from taking place." According to Levy, who is the development director at local Development Corporation Astella, the people can think for themselves. "It is going to cost a tremendous amount of taxpayer's money," he says. "They are always concerned - jobs is a big issue. And Thor has been talking all about jobs."

When it is considered that the vast majority of land behind the boardwalk is taken up by NYCHA buildings, and others subsidized by development corporations, it is unsurprising that opportunities, not amusements that are quietly desired by locals who care little for the petty politics exchanged in the higher echelons of investiture. Coney Island faces one of the most serious poverty problems in Brooklyn. According to the New York Census Bureau's most recent statistics, over half the adult population in the area is unemployed, and 35.6% live below the poverty level. Public talk of jobs has been minimal, although Torres estimates that around 20,000 construction jobs and 5,000 permanent positions would be created by the Mayor's plans. There has been an ominous silence on how and where recruitment will take place, and while the

Mayor's plans will take decades to complete, cynicism is great. Thor's plans are more immediate and have promised local employment, but attempts by the company and other speculators to court the population (Sitt's sponsorship of the local children's Halloween Party this year, or Taconic's enabling of the annual sandcastle competition this summer, for example) have scratched a shallow veneer. "The plans shouldn't affect people on the Coney Island housing projects at all," says Reichenthal defensively. This might be precisely the problem.

Local businesses, and current amusement owners are more concerned than excited by the new plans. The mayor said that he hoped to turn Coney Island into more than simply a warm weather destination. "The only year-round destination in Coney Island is Nathan's," he said at Garguilo's. "And I think that after all these years, Nathan's would like some company." It seems unlikely that it will be the company of old friends. The evergreen idea might appeal to the slaving mouths of potential investors, but it presents problems for those who are being bought out, and not at a price they might consider favorable. "We are prepared to negotiate acquisition of these sites," said Jennifer Torres, spokesperson for the Department of City Planning. "We are confident that we have come up with a plan that is attractive and where everyone can be a winner." This confidence is unlikely to inspire Dennis Vouderis, owner of Deno's Wonder Wheel, who fears he will have to hand land to the City which currently houses his adjoining kiddie park. He told the surrounding press and television at Garguilo's that he found the Mayor's speech "very disturbing" and that he feels, "like we are not living in a democracy right now." Haim Haddad, who owns the Coney Island Beach Shop, declined to comment, but it is likely that the Honky Tonk souvenirs shops on the Boardwalk will disappear, along with their old-time trinkets and chintz.

Yet any construction would be fruitless, if the predictions of environmentalists prove correct. A study by the Earth Institute at Columbia University suggests that by 2020, rising sea levels will already be causing serious flooding in Coney Island. "Nobody knows for sure the extent of the threat," says Tom Angotti, Professor at the Hunter College Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, and former senior planner at the New York City Department of Planning. "But no one talks about the Coney Island Community." The construction of houses or high rises, or of roller coasters and ice-rinks, on a flood plain does not represent forward thinking on any of the warring planners. Beach erosion, which is also a huge environmental concern, is a growing problem which will cost the taxpayer millions of dollars in beach replenishment, he says, a cost that will snowball as the threat of rising sea levels becomes more serious. None of it is included in any Coney Island budget. "What if Coney Island turns into an amusement park without a beach?" he says. "There is no talk of building barriers. Venice is just beginning to build barriers, but that was debated for 25 years."

The great debate continues, but the likely outcome is beyond even the intuitive powers of Madame Zolar's Fortune Booth. Lynn Kelly, of the CIDC, forecasts many more community information sessions, to keep residents abreast of the implementation of plans when they occur. At the moment, the future of the area is a tangled web; if Sitt is willing to sell, the City may be able to implement its plans, but there is no sign that Thor will crumble. If the City gives way and allows Sitt's rezoning request, he may succeed with his high-rise condos and golden elephants. But something, or someone, has got to give. In August, Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff offered to swap some land with Thor, which would allow him to remain in Coney Island, but away from the main Stillwell Avenue area. One can only speculate whether an offer such as this, re-pitched, might break the deadlock.

The greatest fear of all is that, in demanding honky-tonk, in praying for preservation, in lobbying for innovation and in vying for private ownership, in seeking to benefit the project-living community, and to please the pleasure-seeking Manhattanites, amidst the pleas of environmentalists and the tug of war between speculators, nothing at all will happen. There will be no water parks or jobs, hotels or high rises. The sea levels will rise and lots will remain empty, their value slowly draining and the remains of Sodom-by-the-Sea alluding to a more and more distant memory. Without someone giving way, it seems, Coney Island will simply atrophy. The rusted Parachute Jump, no longer draped with ropes and daredevil thrill-seekers, but stark and bare against the grey seafront, may become surrounded once more by the bustle and excitement of one of New York's most vibrant areas. Or it may look down on a dustbowl, permanently covered in billboard sale signs and chain link fences, abandoned by those who are locked in the fierce battle to decide its future.