

# CONEY ISLAND VISIONS

The Bloomberg administration has a plan to rezone Coney Island. But is it really a bold vision for creating a 21st century amusement area that is worthy of its incredible brand and unique place in the hearts of New Yorkers?

To inject fresh ideas into the redevelopment process, the Center for an Urban Future asked thinkers from a variety of fields to share their vision for Coney Island. We talked to dozens of experts from New York and around the world—including amusement industry veterans like the CEO of Copenhagen-based Tivoli Gardens, the founder of a New York based video game development company, the visionary developers of Chelsea Market and Red Hook's Beard Street warehouse, novelists who have written extensively about Coney Island and Brooklyn, and an assortment of architects, urban planners and historians.

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Coney Island is in limbo.

Clashing forces—everyone from City Hall to powerful private developers to Brooklyn community groups—are contending to shape a plan to redevelop the neighborhood. Scores of meetings have been held and public hearings convened, but no consensus has emerged about what this legendary destination, which has changed many times across the years, should look like in the future.

Everyone agrees on the basic history. Beginning in the middle of the 19th century, Coney Island emerged as a mesmerizing hybrid of the fantastic and the risqué, a democratic mixing place where the polyglot metropolis went to eat, bathe, and have fun beneath the same bright seaside sun. But then, around the middle of the 20th century, the neighborhood began its slow decline. That was when New Yorkers, like many Americans, began looking beyond the boroughs for places to vacation.

And yet, the story of Coney Island wasn't over. In recent years, longtime residents, along with artists and new immigrants, have infused the area with a quirky vitality. Now, mermaids parade by the thousands in summer and families attends baseball games or gaze at the specimens on view at the New York Aquarium. And an increasing number of visitors have been returning to lie on the beach and stroll the boardwalk, hop on classic amusement park rides like the Wonder Wheel and Cyclone or just bask in the oceanic light at the rim of New York City.

The change has not gone unnoticed. Developers have moved into the neighborhood and bought up key portions of the former and current amusement district. The city, too, has become involved. In April 2008, the Bloomberg administration announced a new plan to rezone Coney Island in an effort to improve the lives of residents and revive it as a fun-seeking magnet.

But the plan greatly reduces the area set aside for open-air amusements and puts too much faith in "entertainment retail." Many New Yorkers fear that the plan will make it difficult, if not impossible, to restore Coney Island to its historic place as a truly great entertainment district. And though the city's blueprint is a critical step in the effort to revitalize the neighborhood after decades of decline, it is hardly a bold vision for creating a 21st century amusement mecca that is worthy of its incredible brand and unique place in the hearts of New Yorkers.

It's not too late for a new vision for Coney Island to emerge.

In the hope of improving upon the city's plan, the Center for an Urban Future asked thinkers from a variety of fields to share their vision of what Coney Island could be. We talked to dozens of experts from New York and around the world—including amusement industry veterans like the CEO of Copenhagen-based Tivoli Gardens, the founder of a New York based video game development company, the visionary developers of Chelsea Market and Red Hook's Beard Street warehouse, novelists who have written extensively about Coney Island and Brooklyn, and an assortment of architects, urban planners and historians.

We undertook this exercise in partnership with the Municipal Arts Society (MAS), which recently kicked off "ImagineConey," a major campaign to develop new ideas for Coney Island's future. While the Center took the lead in conducting interviews with prominent thinkers, MAS is currently soliciting ideas from the public—at [www.imagineconey.com](http://www.imagineconey.com)—on how to restore Coney Island to its place as a great entertainment and amusement destination.

Most of the people we contacted have not been involved in the nitty-gritty details of the struggle to reshape the neighborhood. That is by design. Our goal in publishing the visions that follow is to inject fresh ideas into the redevelopment process and help ensure that Coney Island reclaims its place as a world class amusement center.

The Center for an Urban Future is New York City's home for independent research and innovative thinking about key issues affecting the five boroughs. For more information or to sign up for our monthly e-mail bulletin, visit [www.nycfuture.org](http://www.nycfuture.org).

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Interviews conducted by Jonathan Bowles, Tara Colton, David Giles and Jim O'Grady.

## **What's missing from Coney Island? What would you like to see developed there in the future?**

Almost anything: a roller rink or an ice skating rink or a fantastic multi-alleyed bowling alley, like at Chelsea Piers. Their bowling alley is very much in the spirit of Coney Island, it's like a giant human pinball machine. You should also look at the future of amusements. The thing about all those great parks [like Luna Park] is that at the time, in a weird way, they were also about science and innovation. It was like a permanent World's Fair there. You have to be careful of total nostalgia and thinking everything has to be like the 19th century. At the time it wasn't nostalgia that brought people there, it was this bizarre combination of hedonistic thrills and curiosity about the future; it was how many light bulbs could be lit up at the same time and incubator babies were invented there. As much as the tattoo and mermaid nostalgia stuff is nice, look into that question of what would be the contemporary equivalent of: there's no place on earth except here to see so many light bulbs lit up at once or an incubator baby. Somebody ought to find a way to build the greatest virtual reality park ever made, the 21st century equivalent of Luna Park.

## **As a native Brooklynite, what does Coney Island mean to you?**

Growing up here as a kid in the era that I did [the 1970s], the idea of Coney Island was really strong. The New York Aquarium was really vital in that period and the two things in New York that I visited most, between classes and family visits, were the Museum of Natural History and the aquarium. I couldn't count how many times I went to the aquarium, combining that with beachgoing. My mother grew up in Queens, and was a New York beachgoer and she didn't mind a beach covered with people. We would always go to Nathan's and have hot dogs and talk about the legend of that being the best New York hot dogs and do some bumper cars. I was too young to ride the Cyclone. The idea of Coney Island was very important and so I took it as a given that it was this splendid place even in its somewhat fatigued state back then. A lot of New York City was kind of run down then. The city had this glamour of disrepair and Coney Island seemed natural to me in that state. Then, later on, learning about how big it had been, watching that great PBS documentary on the era of Luna Park and just understanding how important it was in the history of the city, and some of the facts and events of what went on there and how many people went there. Then, as I began to research the city and the history of Brooklyn to write books like *Fortress of Solitude*, to understand the meaning of Coney Island in the history of Brooklyn and its faded greatness. It was a symbol of Brooklyn's lost immensity, in a way.

## **What do you think of the current incarnation of Coney Island?**

I haven't been there substantially in a while except for a couple visits to the Mermaid Parade, and I haven't used the beach in decades, but I really am a believer in the idea that it should have its peculiar importance. I think, from this vantage point, the greatest thing that's happened is the Cyclones [the minor league baseball team] in that, having a history of being a location for sports and along with the same effect of putting the aquarium there, it reinforced Coney Island as a destination where there were various public amusements and various pleasures by the sea. That seems very right to me and it's also seemed therefore kind of intriguing to me in opposing the Atlantic Yards project, which I have been very involved in doing. One of the things that's perverse about this is that maybe Coney Island would love to have something like this [an arena for the Nets]. While it's a real sore thumb here close to downtown Brooklyn, it might be a marvelous result to have a professional sports team there.

## **Developer Joe Sitt, who grew up in the area, has put forth some pretty glitzy proposals for developing Coney Island. Are those the right ideas?**

Being from the place does not necessarily make you the best caretaker of its meaning in a larger sense, [Brooklyn Borough President] Marty Markowitz being a key example. I think sometimes people who are of a place are too eager to erase the scruffy complicated meanings that have attached to it in favor of something quite slick, which I think is the kind of mistake that Markowitz was prone to with his encouragement of [Atlantic Yards developer Bruce] Ratner. Obviously there's so many reasons he fell in behind that proposal, his authentic Brooklyn-ness didn't let him see the limitations of something so monolithic and futuristic. Sometimes people who at one level understand or are sympathetic or open, they're not being cynical in their attempts, but the only things they know how to promote have that kind of vapid slickness because it is just what developers make money on, so that's who has got their ear and that's what they know how to urge on people. It's a lack of the vocabulary of knowing how to make other kinds of things possible. It's not their fault, it's the fault of a commercial society that only urges progress forward in this sense; if there's a developer, they must know what's best. But we are at an interesting moment in a larger sense of American life, where questions have been raised about what capital knows, so it's a really good time to look to other kinds of value and meaning.

## **How important are amusements to the character of Coney Island?**

I'd really be sorry to see it turned into a private residential pleasure zone. It's got to have a public function.

## So, what are your visions for the future of Coney Island?

The first thing I'd say is [look at] the Mermaid Parade. That's a thing where Coney Island, on the ropes with a lot of people thinking its great days were behind it, people literally came together and created something there that connected to the deep historical meaning of the place but was also new and strange and fun. It wasn't about anyone taking profit and there wasn't an immediate beneficiary and it helped reinvigorate the city's imagination of the place and made it exist again. Also, look very closely at the history of the Cyclone [roller coaster]—the fact that no one will let the Cyclone die. That stands out. The land it is on has to be worth more than the Cyclone, but no one can let go of it. Look at Coney Island as a version of the Cyclone, as you preserve it and upkeep it.

Of course it can't stay the same. It can't be frozen in time. And too much of it is run down and ramshackle, but you do need to have stakeholders who have a very strong voice who are speaking for the vision and the continuity and the meaning that can be created there. One of the positive things, when you say that some of the space is owned by the city and some is private. That's good. The nightmare of Atlantic Yards is that Ratner bought everything up. Also, one of the great things that created so much energy in the old Coney Island, and this is very true of the city in other senses, is the rivalry of the different amusement parks. It wasn't one, there might have been a dominant one but then another one came up. There were always several. These rivalries, multiple stakeholders, that's great.

## Eric Zimmerman, founder of video game development company Gamelab

### Do you have a connection to Coney Island?

My grandfather was actually a strongman at the Coney Island circus. We have pictures of him posing in his strongman costume. He was an immigrant from Germany. The family story is that he fell in love with a Japanese tight rope walker, but his family threatened to disown him, because she wasn't Jewish. He ended up marrying my grandmother instead.

In terms of my own personal history, I grew up in Bloomington, Indiana. Coney Island has an incredible history, but I grew up in the Midwest, where carnivals and amusement parks have their own kind of cultural importance. Every summer, there was a carnival that came to Bloomington that I used to attend. And when I was in junior high, we'd go to amusement parks like King's Island in Cincinnati. All of this exposure to amusement parks definitely influenced my career choice to become a game designer. I used to fantasize about designing roller coasters and other park rides. Amusement rides and games are not a passive experience; they really emphasize interaction on the part of people playing. In that way, they have really influenced my interest in creating games.

### What's your vision for remaking Coney Island into a 21st century amusement district?

I think people's relationship to media and designed experiences are really undergoing a major change in this century. The 20th century model of media interaction is sitting on a couch, clicking through cable channels—in some ways an active model of media participation, but in the end it is about being fed a stream of information. It's still mostly passive. More and more, I think people are expecting a much more deeply interactive relationship with the media, art and popular culture they consume. Wikipedia is a great example of this. It's not just information online—it is actively generated by its users. People are constantly editing each other's work and voting on Wikipedia's policies. The rise and prevalence of video games are also a testament to this desire for deeper engagement. Twenty or 30 years ago, video games were still kind of a geeky stepchild to other forms of entertainment. Now, economically, they're of the same scale as other forms of entertainment and they no longer have that geeky stigma.

Amusement parks are really wonderful precedents for our contemporary movement towards designed interactive experiences. They're very participatory—on many levels. Amusement park rides and games can give you a thrill, provide a space for social interaction, challenge your skills, or even can tell a story. For example, you're not just going on a roller coaster; you're going on a trip in a coal mine. Of course, Walt Disney took this idea of amusement ride as narrative and pushed it very far.

### What does this mean for a revitalized Coney Island?

I think that while the amusement park model provides an interesting precedent, I don't think it's as deeply participatory as it could be. The challenge is that you don't want to completely overhaul Coney Island and erase its legacy. You want to maintain that sense of history. You want the experiences that replicate the great amusement park rides. But I think you can layer new experiences on top of those classic experiences.

I was thinking of an emerging genre of games that take place in public spaces and use new technologies like cell phones or GPS locators. These are sometimes known as “Big Games” or alternate reality games. And these games would take place in and about the space of Coney Island. For example, there could be a visual scavenger hunt you could compete in with a camera phone throughout the park. As you search for particular things to photograph, you are earning points and trying to win prizes, but also learning about the history of Coney Island. Maybe there are games where you are part of a group trying to locate, “tag” or “assassinate” other players. There could be experiences where people sign up to collaboratively solve a mystery, where you’re getting clues on a phone or palm device. Visitors to the park could use their own smartphone devices, or check them out from a game center when they enter the park. I can imagine a set of games that would do justice to 21st century idea of entertainment but are layered on top of the experience of Coney Island.

## **Do you think this would help Coney Island attract new people?**

It could appeal to a new generation and bring all sorts of people to Coney Island who wouldn’t go there otherwise. Let’s say the twenty-something Williamsburg set. There’s a huge hunger among young people to have these kind of interactive experiences. They don’t just want to go to an art show or a movie, but to be part of a social experience, something different that’s going to challenge them. There’s an amazing opportunity here to use the new Coney Island as a place where these kinds of games could happen.

## **Is there any precedent to doing something like this?**

One of the reasons this idea is compelling for New York is that it fits nicely with the makeup of the city’s video game industry, which is pretty unique in the industry in doing casual and educational games. There’s lots of potential partners right here. For instance, area/code is a company in the city that’s done large scale big urban games. There are academic projects like PETLab at Parsons School of Design that is looking at mobile technologies and “Big Games.” There is the Institute of Play, a nonprofit looking at how games can be used for learning, and Eyebeam, a museum for digital art here in New York that hosts artists and designers who want to come in and work with digital technologies. Then, there’s an organization called Come Out and Play here that puts on one of the premier festivals of street games.

## **Would doing this require any specific new infrastructure at Coney Island?**

What’s interesting about this is that we’re not talking about building a giant laser park. Rather, you could integrate these kinds of games into whatever plans you have for Coney Island. You probably are going to need some informational infrastructure in the park—such as a dedicated Bluetooth network. You also probably want to have some kind of headquarters for these games, the place you would go to sign up for games that would start every hour or to check out the technology devices. But in terms of overall expenditure, the costs could be quite low. Mostly what is required is the imagination and talent to create them.

## **Alexander Garvin, president and CEO of Alex Garvin & Associates, a New York-based urban planning firm**

### **What is your vision for Coney Island?**

The answer is if you brought in P.T. Barnum to run the attractions, you would have people flocking there. I think the key to making an exciting Coney Island is the attraction. Today, especially when people have the choice of playing video games, going on the internet and watching TV, hopping on a plane and going to Japan, there’s lots of competition for the entertainment time of people in New York. You have the theater, Chinatown, other things.

At Coney Island, you need a super attraction. To look only at zoning and the landscape is to miss the point. What you need is something that people want to do. Places people want to go. I think it’s a fascinating problem and if I were trying to solve it I really would find today’s P.T. Barnum and I’d say to him, what can we do to help you? What’s going to be an exciting place for the 12 year old to go there, just as Alex Garvin went there as a 12 year old in 1953?

### **Why have that at Coney Island? Hasn’t time passed it by?**

There’s a historical reason that one might want to do it on Coney Island. It was once upon a time a resort and then an extremely successful amusement district. These were all attractions that operated for money. Nostalgia is one of the reasons. There’s

history here. There are some things left over that could be reused with not so much trouble. I don't know that the amusement park of 1900 is the application that could survive in 2025. Other cities have such places: Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, The Prater in Vienna—which is not in the center of Vienna.

## **What else should planners keep in mind as they move forward?**

The question is: what is a 21st century amusement park? Can you get people out there? It's still a long ride. So it'll probably have to be mostly from people from Brooklyn. Brooklyn is, what, 2.5 million people? It's not a small market.

We have places that are entertainment centers that attract large numbers of people. We have one in New York: Times Square. It has managed to reinvent itself. Of course, it's in the center. It's doing so well that there's too many people. There are other places: The strip in Las Vegas, Beale Street in Memphis, Vieux Carre in New Orleans.

I'm a great believer in ferries and ferry systems. But it takes a long time to get to Coney Island by boat. If we had a real waterfront transportation system that would change things. Take the example of the Navy Pier in Chicago. That works: it is filled with people all the time. Navy Pier was created out of whole cloth. It was abandoned and the city created a commission. It pre-dates Daley. The Plan of Chicago in 1909 called for recreation piers on both sides of Grant Park, a mile and half into the lake. Navy Pier re-opened in 1995 and it has nine million visitors annually. It's flocked with kids, and some tourists. The other is the Santa Monica Pier. But the Santa Monica Pier is very special in the Los Angeles metro area. You've got to be able to attract hundreds of thousands of people a day. Times Square works. It attracts tourists, people from the New York metro region. Everybody goes to Times Square—tourists, theatergoers or they work there. And there are even residents on 6th and 8th Avenues.

## **Do you have a particular connection to, or fondest memory of, Coney Island?**

As a child, I couldn't wait for the month of April when Coney Island opened. I used to take a long subway ride from the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The things you could do in New York at age 12 were vast, but nothing like now, when people think nothing of going for the weekend to Paris. We changed trains to the N or the R. It took well over an hour to get there. You'd go to the west side and change at Times Square. Three or four of us went. I don't remember if I had 5 or 10 dollars but you'd go out there and spend it and when you finished, you'd go home. Rides. There were wonderful rides. The Cyclone, parachute jump, Bobsled roller coaster. That was terrific—very exciting. I didn't go to the beach when I went there. We went away in the summertime. I went because it was fun. My parents let me go on the subway. It's exciting. And that's what you need in Coney Island. There were lots of different places you could go, lots of different rides, not just one. There was the boardwalk, you could eat at Nathan's.

**Mike Wallace**, professor of history at John Jay College of Criminal Justice;  
co-author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*

## **How should the historical Coney Island inform what comes next there?**

The original one was a working place and is not able to be recreated. It had a real function in a mercantile city. It is, in fact, possible that the role it once played is no longer playable because the world it was playing to and playing for is profoundly different.

There is no one Coney Island, there's a variety of Coneyes. Coney always served different needs and different classes. The east side of it had these super high-end, glassy, Victorian hideaways, largely for women and kiddies. Then you had the skuzzy end at Norton's Point: liquor, drugs and fallen women. There has always been a contest over what Coney Island is about—how much would it be about raucousness?

What motored it from the 1830s through the 1890s and into the 20th century was the raunchiness. People came here because they could let their hair down, let their dresses down. When you're working six days a week and 10 hours a day, when it came time to have fun, you shot the moon. It was a free-fire zone. You could behave as you wouldn't back in Manhattan at a time when there weren't many other entertainment options.

Coney Island was like a dance hall: anybody could go in, including people of disreputable backgrounds. Kids could go, meet and hook up. This was commercial space. You paid your nickel, got in and there was basically nobody overseeing you. There was a sense of freedom to do whatever you wanted. Luna Park was spectacular: one million light bulbs. And it gave windows into other worlds. Granted, they seem racist and colonialist to our eyes now—reproductions of the Kasbah and freak shows. They were hawking weirdness. But the oddities and people pushing at gender boundaries added to Coney's tremendous appeal. Like Havana during prohibition: all bets are off.

There was nothing like it anywhere else on earth so people did come from all over the place. It was also very much of its time for its concept of industrial fun. You strapped yourself into scary machines that caused you to grab on to the person sitting next to you.

## **Did it change over time?**

The reason the working class continued to pile in during the first half of the 20th century is that there were upgrades, like Steeplechase Park. That was a move toward Disney. It was light, uplifting and clean.

[Walt] Disney hated Coney Island. He hated carnivals, circuses and fairs. He thought they were dirty and wanted to clean them up. Robert Moses was the same. He wanted fences and segregated entertainment zones. He wanted Jones Beach. But we have to face it, Disneyland is the single most popular tourist destination on earth.

## **What is your vision for Coney Island?**

One wouldn't want a reified, abstract, cartoonish version of Coney Island—to preserve a few remaining shells when the entire web of experience and meaningfulness is gone. Like the New York City area in Las Vegas that abstracts signs of the city, like pseudo-skyscrapers.

The notion of recapture is what's problematic. I just worry about the degree to which the historical specificity that made Coney what it was, if that world is gone, not reproducible. The next Coney might not look anything at all like the last Coney.

Will it be multi-lingual? Will it be global? Probably not. And cheap is certainly the operative word. If you put in the latest holographic machines, it's hard to imagine that the admission price is going to get today's immigrants.

Whoever's doing this should talk to Vietnamese, Ecuadorian, Pakistani immigrants and try to figure out what it would take to get them there. Go talk to Joe Salvo, head of demography at [the New York City Department of] City Planning. New York is still accepting a colossal movement of people from around the globe. You don't have one or two groups in a neighborhood anymore; you have nine, ten, eleven. You have Chinese, Cuban and Trinidadian in one place. What would make Coney Island comfortable and attractive to them? I think you need anthropologists, sociologists and demographers who can deal with and analyze the market.

## **What specific types of new amusements or entertainment uses would be ideal for helping to make Coney Island a popular 21st century entertainment district?**

What made it work in the first place? The beach made it. One thing enduring about that place is the beach. It's the closest beach by mass transit for a lot of New Yorkers. In the 1840s and 1850s, steamboats would have mass outings there. And then, very quickly, railroad lines. That's why they were coming, for the beach.

I just don't hear it talked about much. If we're looking for fundamentals, there's the ocean.

It's not what kind of cool machines can you come up with. It's that New York still has tons of people who can't afford to travel in the summer. The access routes to Coney are still there. And there is still the beach. What can the city do to make it culturally comfortable to get those people there?

## **Do you have a particular connection to, or fondest memory of, Coney Island?**

I hated the big machines. They just terrified me. I was a good little middle class boy. We lived in Sunnyside and then Fresh Meadows. We had a car. We would go to Jones Beach or Wantagh State Park. This was the 1950s. My parents were upwardly aspiring. They wanted more square inches of sand and less radio noise. That was Robert Moses' genius: to know that one wants a suburban beach to go with one's suburban life.

## **What are some of your specific ideas for remaking Coney Island?**

Put amusements on a new pier—expand the footprint of the amusement zone without taking from the existing land. Adding more attractions and expanding the amusement district in creative ways is the surest path to revitalize Coney Island without turning it into a seaside mall. The goal must be a vibrant amusement district that extends from Asser Levy Park to Child's Restaurant with year-round attractions that complement rather than replace seasonal amusements. The city can best achieve this goal by looking more closely at Coney Island's past as it creates iconic structures that embody its future.

Widen portions of the boardwalk into the beach. Put up a kiddie park, concert hall, carousel, dancing pavilion, restaurants. Without sacrificing a great deal of the beach, you could create enough space to double the size of Astroland. Enhanced use of the boardwalk, including its expansion at several locations between Asser Levy Park and Child's to allow for additional amusements, food stands and pavilions would further increase the footprint of the core amusement district.

New Jersey shore resorts including Seaside Heights, Wildwood, and Point Pleasant have amusement pavilions along portions of their boardwalks that include rides and concert venues. Dancing and music was a mainstay at Coney Island from its inception and its revitalization should include venues for dining and dancing overlooking the ocean, along with year-round concert venues.

From the early 1880s to the turn of 19th century, there were three piers: two iron piers with ferry terminals, restaurants and bath houses. And the early Steeplechase pier. The beach was interrupted by the piers so there certainly is a precedent for that. If they did a pier for a ferry, it would be going back to what was there.

## **What do you feel about the notion of making Coney Island a year-round destination, rather than just a seasonal attraction?**

I did a lot of looking at New Jersey seashore resorts. The CIDC [Coney Island Development Corporation] is missing the mark in the notion that seasonal amusements don't work and aren't successful. While I support attractions, entertainment and venues that would attract people year round, I think the city shouldn't underestimate the viability of seasonal amusements.

Go to Seaside Heights, Wildwood and Point Pleasant and you'll see what should be part of the vision for Coney Island. Wildwood has three piers with amusements. Seaside Heights has two piers with traditional Coney Island games and amusement. The difference between Wildwood and Coney Island is the difference between an urban environment and a traditional seaside community.

By all means, let's make Coney Island a tourist venue year round. But don't do it in a way that sacrifices seasonal amusements. Because then you'll lose the traditional Coney Island. Then you'll get what the city says it doesn't want: a seaside mall.

## **Other have expressed concern about turning Coney Island into a mall. How do you prevent this?**

The CIDC has increased the area of "developable land" in the core amusement district without clearly stipulating what portion will be devoted to classic Coney Island amusements as distinct from "entertainment retail." This should be squarely addressed with ample space set aside for rides and traditional amusements in enclosed pavilions. The centerpiece could be a glass-sheathed Mermaid Pavilion that evokes Steeplechase Park's Pavilion of Fun. All efforts must be made to ensure that Coney's amusement zone not be converted into a seaside mall under the guise of "entertainment retail."

## **You've previously talked about the idea of new ferries for Coney Island. Could you elaborate on this?**

Ferries would be a terrific idea and if they do need to build a pier for them, it would be crazy not to put amusements on it. Don't build a ferry pier that's just a transportation terminal with small amenities at the end of it. That's nuts. If you're doing a study about it, look into doing a gateway pier with amusements.

The CIDC has delayed its request for a scoping study on the resumption of ferry service to Coney Island. The RFP will examine the feasibility of a new pier that could include some amusements. Coney Island had several such piers that served as ferry terminals. Ferry service could play a critical role in luring visitors to Coney Island. An excursion that includes a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty and a cruise under the Verrazano Bridge as part of a day spent at the new Coney Island would be attractive to tourists, especially if the pier is conceived as an iconic gateway to a rejuvenated Coney Island. A pier with amusements would mark the first increase in the amusement zone's footprint in the roughly one hundred years since the 1911 fire that destroyed Dreamland and Coney Island's two iron piers.

## How should the New York Aquarium tie into plans to remake the amusement district?

In a redesigned Coney Island, you wouldn't have the sense that the amusement district ends at the aquarium. The aquarium's plan to redesign its perimeter and create an unobstructed view of the ocean has stalled. The city should consider other ways to integrate the aquarium into the broader amusement district. I propose that a portion of the aquarium grounds be encircled by a signature attraction that evokes the Steeplechase Racetrack but with an aquatic theme. It could be called the Aqua Racer. Part coaster, part monorail, and part scenic railway, riders could be transported on sea-horses, dolphins, jellyfish, and sharks and pass through aquatic environments that mirror aquarium exhibits. The CIDC and aquarium could solicit design proposals from a vendor who would create and operate the ride as a concession in partnership with the city and the aquarium. With a ride, you'd get the sense that the aquarium was part of the district. Something that not only opens up the aquarium to the amusement district but give you the sense that it's part of it.

## What do you think about the prospect of residential development in Coney?

The city has proposed adding upwards of 5,000 residential units to the areas within the redevelopment district that have been designated Coney North and Coney West and about Surf Avenue to the north and west of the core amusement zone. The city needs to carefully assess the impact of the envisioned neighborhoods on the historic amusement district and must make certain that the services and amenities required for new residents are adequate. The CIDC's goal of making Coney Island a "year-round visitor destination" envisions entertainment venues on the ground floors of Surf Avenue. That goal will be undermined if venues like House of Blues are forced to compete for space with dry cleaners.

## Lars Liebst, CEO, Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens, the second oldest amusement park in the world

### You visited Coney Island last year. What did you think of its current incarnation and the plans for its redevelopment?

I think it's a shame that it looks like what it looks like. I think you citizens of New York deserve much better. I think what you have out there is a jewel. You have now a coming president that's talking about change; well, maybe you could use that here as well. We need change out there. You should look for something that is far better than what you have now.

Once, you had it out there. I think the whole area out there could be an area where not only the locals or the domestic travelers but also the international travelers would love to go. I talked to [New York City Deputy Mayor for Economic Development] Robert Lieber a few times, and they have been over here, and I said: 'you can make this a destination. But if you make it a destination, you should really think big.' That's not what they're doing at the moment. That plan, it is getting smaller and smaller every time I see a new plan. 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, because I think it will serve different purposes. First of all, it will get a lot of the locals jobs; it will serve the purpose of getting a new income source for New York—maybe you need it after Lehman Brothers and Wall Street—and it will be a destination or it could be a destination like the Chrysler Building, like Central Park, if you do it right. If you do it wrong, it will only be for locals. You have to decide for yourself, is this something where we do yet another local park or is this something where we try to create something for the whole metropolis of New York?

### What does "thinking big" mean for Coney Island?

You can do as we did when we started here. We just looked back in our history. Use your own history, but in a modern version.

### What would a modern Coney Island look like? Are there specific amusements or attractions you would recommend?

There are a lot that you have had out there. Why don't you create a pier? Why don't you start up a boat from downtown New York that could go over there, so the access to that area will be much easier.

## Lars Liebst (continued)

### What would Coney Island need to make it more of a destination?

You shouldn't just look at it as an amusement area. Look at it as a whole area where you could add cultural activities, where you could do something about hotels and restaurants. You shouldn't just do another Six Flags, because if you do, forget it.

### Why shouldn't it just become another Six Flags?

Because you have how many Six Flags? You have a good history at Coney Island, so you should do something where people would like to go. Why don't you do something with the piers and the beautiful beach hotels and all of that. Look at Santa Monica and Shutters [a luxury hotel on the beach]. Don't be afraid of going upscale.

### How does the rest of the world view Coney Island?

For Danes, there is something about Coney Island. They don't know what it is, but they have heard the name. I think you can revitalize that name. It is a very good brand and I think you could use it. It could add another day for the tourists making a trip in New York. What is important here is to emphasize is that the tourists will only come if you also have the locals. That's why we have been capable of surviving for 160 years, because we have the locals. If it is only tourists, it will only be a tourist destination. Because Coney Island is where it is, I think it should be a destination for the locals and for tourists, for everyone. That's why you have to add something more than just rides, like culture and history.

### What kinds of cultural attractions would you suggest for Coney Island?

We have a symphony orchestra in Tivoli. You have beautiful symphony orchestras in New York, you have jazz, why don't you invite them out there? Why don't you do rock concerts? You have Alvin Ailey, you have American Ballet Theater, you have the New York City Ballet, you have beautiful theaters, musicals... Why don't you bring those out there?

## Irwin Cohen, developer of the Chelsea Market

### What's been missing from the plans to remake Coney Island?

You just should not look at rezoning eight or nine acres of Coney Island amusements, because you'll just end up with some commercial development which will not live out the historical significance of this area. I believe that we have to go back to what Coney Island was a long time ago, when the ocean met the bay. The area was then filled in, and it was developed, the south side with amusements and to the north with housing. When I look at a map of that area, I see the land from the Atlantic Ocean to the bay (to the north) as one use and there should be activity running north from where the amusement activities take place. So everything from the bay towards the Coney Island amusement area should be rezoned.

### What do you think should go there?

That area should become something that does not exist in southern Brooklyn: a market of new businesses making food and crafts. Right now, there is no place in Brooklyn that is a center for developing and manufacturing high quality food at reasonable prices. By creating a market in Brooklyn, north of the amusement park, you're bringing in people to come shop and creating an industry of preparing food and selling it wholesale for the people in Brooklyn. Just think about having hundreds of family-owned businesses preparing foods and little tiny cafes in these establishments. People will come to get that good food. The market is there. The people who come to Coney for the beach and the amusements will be the first thrust of customers for this market. Later on, as the market matures, people will come to the market because it will become a destination. So it will not have to depend on the beach or the amusements, and will become an all-year-round marketplace. It will attract people who really want to run their own businesses.

Our economic turmoil will absolutely require new ways for people in New York to earn a living. We have to create a new environment in New York for people who need jobs. Instead of having jobs, they will have their own business. These can be family ventures. You can call it Family Ventures.

### Could you elaborate on what types of businesses you're talking about as part of this new market?

It doesn't have to be restricted just to food. You could have furniture makers, knitters. I'm talking about crafts, not someone opening up a knitting factory with 300 employees. They'll be turning out quality merchandise. You have to find crafts and food that does

## Irwin Cohen (continued)

not need huge amounts of space. This can become a model for other parts of the city. People won't have to leave Brooklyn for work. They can be living and working in their community.

### Could you give me an example of the type of food businesses you have in mind?

It has to be food that is prepared. Bakeries hardly exist in New York now. People who buy baked goods get it in plastic with a long shelf life, because it's coming from other parts of the country. To have a concentration of bakers in one area where distributors and retailers can come and get fresh baked goods that morning, so that they can sell freshly prepared foods in the markets or restaurants, is a very good business. There also could be food that's prepared from what's available in New York. For instance, there's an awful lot of fish that comes into nearby Sheepshead Bay. The amount of fish soup that can be prepared; it's unlimited. This could become the fish preparation center for New York City. That's an industry that doesn't exist in New York that could be fantastic.

### How exactly do you do this? There are houses now in the area you're talking about.

What I was thinking of is a general rezone of all housing and commercial where you would have commercial use on the ground floors and the upper floors of all housing units could be where people who work in ground floors have a place to live. The moment you have a general rezoning and people realize the value of commercial rezoning, they could start to develop businesses and live upstairs. The beauty of using these residences for cooking is that you don't have to run very expensive flues up to the roofs of the gas ovens. If you're using these homes, one, two and three stories, it's relatively inexpensive to create a bakery or cooking facility.

### Do you have any other ideas for the amusement area itself?

It has to be something that does not exist now in New York. I really think it has to be combined with a university without school rooms. Maybe you have to find the next Cirque du Soleil. But you want to find the next step after that. It could be something that's now in China or India or somewhere else. We don't know yet. With the population of Brooklyn, if we can get that new idea to come into Coney Island and then use the great stock of young people in Brooklyn to learn how to do all the new things, you now have something that people will have to come to Coney Island to see and experience. Maybe it would be the greatest glass blowing training program that ever existed. Or maybe some new form of circus.

### What's your connection to Coney Island?

I was born in Brooklyn, in East Flatbush on Utica Avenue and Beverly Road. My great thrill was going to Coney Island. That was one of the great adventures of my young life.

### Is there still time to make it such a special place again?

It still exists and still has these great beaches. Really terrific things can be done there. But it shouldn't be just to rezone these nine acres and bring in chains and build apartment houses. That will just be walls that will block these fantastic views of the ocean. That's not what you need there. You need comprehensive zoning from ocean to bay. It will spur development of the whole area. There's enough room in other parts of New York to build apartments. We need jobs.

## Dianna Carlin, founder of Lola Star Souvenir Boutique and Dreamland Roller Rink

### What's your vision for remaking Coney Island?

One of the key things is creating an environment that encourages small businesses and people with creative ideas to come to Coney Island. That is what has made Coney what it is: creative entrepreneurs with elaborate ideas that stretch people's perceptions of what's possible and take you to a heightened state of reality. Coney Island has always thrilled visitors with attractions which stretched their perception of reality. Attractions that no one had ever witnessed before, like an enormous wooden hotel built in the shape of an elephant, the glittering lights of Luna Park which exhibited the wonders of electricity in a way that no one had ever witnessed and baby incubators which amazed patrons while saving lives. It is this type of unique, creative attractions which challenge visitors' perceptions of reality which should be encouraged in the redevelopment of Coney Island.

**How do you do that?**

That is something that you cannot really write into the zoning. The city should create incentives for small businesses, creative entrepreneurs and artists. They should require a certain number of small storefronts for every larger chain store and make these storefronts available at a reduced cost to artists and small businesses. Something needs to be done to encourage artists to come. Ultimately, it is these creative businesses that are going to preserve the uniqueness of Coney Island.

**Do you have any specific ideas for 21st century amusements?**

The new Coney Island will have to compete with modern forms of amusement like video games and MTV. I have a vision of creating an amusement park which makes the music video world of MTV come alive. The park will have rides that will take you into different worlds that combine music and art somewhat like a music video. My vision is to pair visual and musical artists, like Matthew Barney and Bjork, to create this multi-sensory experience of the music which combines visuals and sound. The ride could also feature live music, like a concert that you would experience as you travel through this fantasy world. It could change throughout the year and feature different recording and visual artists.

**Are there other examples from around the world that Coney should use as inspiration?**

The question we need to ask is: how can we take amusements further and reinvent them? There are some fantastic amusement parks that could be used as models but I don't think the new Coney Island should be based on anything that already exists. The new Coney Island should be something the world has never seen before. An amusement park that takes visitors to a heightened state of reality in a way that they have never before experienced. I don't know of any other place in the world that succeeds at this in the way I hope the new Coney will. It is definitely not entertainment retail! Retail is not the new amusement park, as many people working on the redevelopment seem to feel.

**What's the future of your much-publicized roller rink?**

I have visions of taking my roller rink to a different level. The environment I try to create inside my Dreamland Roller Rink is one that transports people to this dream world. I want visitors to be transported into a fantasy world like the imaginary world you create as a child. When people come to my roller rink, they are seeking a release from day to day life. Every week we have a different themed skate party where we play music and screen visuals associated with that theme and encourage skaters to dress in costume. I'd like to take this "Dreamland" concept further and have a fabulous, roller rink within the new development in which the whole design and architecture of the rink takes you into another world. A fabulous "Dreamland" unlike anything the world has ever witnessed!

## Lisa Chamberlain, executive director, Forum for Urban Design and author, *Slackonomics*

**What's your vision for reviving Coney Island?**

One thought is to have an express train from Times Square to Coney Island and do some cross branding. Call it surf and turf. Times Square is probably one of the most visited place on earth. But at least now, Coney Island is visited almost exclusively by people from this region. Few tourists go there. Having some cross branding and an express train from Times Square would help change that.

**How would you remake the area to be a vibrant 21st century amusement district?**

Once upon a time, Coney Island was known as futuristic and forward looking. It exhibited ideas about the future. We need to bring that spirit back. The nostalgia needs to be there. That's part of the character of Coney Island. But to really reinvent the place, we need to look forward. Maybe we should create an urban eco energy exhibit, with rides, that looks towards the future. One of the things that we've been dancing around here at the Forum for Urban Design is this idea of a vertical farm, or urban agriculture. Perhaps a futuristic prototype of a vertical farm could go there. This could be very razzle dazzle. Coney would be a cool place to do a futuristic version of this.

**What other things should planners keep in mind as they try to redevelop the area?**

The aquarium is in terrible shape. Better incorporating water into this experience of going to Coney Island should start with how

to move that aquarium into the 21st century. There were some designs proposed. Now they're sidelined because of lack of money. It's sad when you look at what's happening in China and other countries, and we can't even fix our aquarium. Once upon a time, it was one of the greatest aquariums in the world. Rather than just coming to look at fish, it could be more about: what is the future of our oceans.

## Michael Sorkin, principal, Michael Sorkin Studio and director, the Graduate Urban Design Program at City College

### **What concerns you most about the much talked about revitalization of Coney Island?**

The thing about Coney Island of course was always that it was raffish and non-generic, and the degree to which this becomes a themeing exercise, I think, it's a step backwards. Thinking about the history of Coney Island, there was certainly 'indoor-ness' a hundred years ago, so I don't think that's necessary the pivot on which the negative reaction should turn. On the other hand, if it's just to become another branded generic shopping mall, this would be tragic.

I don't know what the economics of retaining the freak shows and electrocuted elephants are, but I do think if that's what people want, that's what we should zone for. The issue should be forced. The style of compromising in deference to the so-called practicalities—those compromises are evanescent, they're predicated in the economics of the moment and often don't take a long enough view.

### **What should the redevelopment plan look like in your opinion?**

I'm 100 percent for trying to restore Coney Island to its subversive, quasi-outlaw, quirky, individual, raffish qualities, and I think that the politicians should force the issue rather than knuckling under as usual to the typical real estate interests and arguments.

It's not out of the question that a hotel could be built and add to the qualities that make Coney Island unique. But the city has to exercise control. It's too often reluctant to assert itself.

### **What should the architecture look like? How can the city ensure that that raffishness is kept?**

If any place were a good place for a competition, this is it! A wide open architectural competition. One wants to exercise the absolute limits of creativity in a case like this. The aura is so powerful.

The syndrome of trying to define things without imagining them—so to allow something to proceed "as of right"—seems like folly to me. The city should know what it wants and take control of the situation to bring it about.

## Paul Goldberger, architecture critic, *The New Yorker*

### **What about Coney Island's past should be taken into account in plans to redevelop the area?**

My experience with Coney Island is more symbolic than real. I think of it as critical in the shaping of New York's identity, reflecting the theatricality and flamboyance that have always been as much a part of the city's nature as commerce has been.

## What is your vision for Coney Island?

"Make no small plans." In some ways, what should be done out there is to make some small plans. Coney Island is a beautiful urban space because that's emerged organically over the years. It should remain mixed use: honky-tonk, burlesque and ballpark, a safe mixing of New Yorkers of all incomes. Simply trying to support that would be useful: some businesses, people of mixed incomes.

Coney Island through its history has been kind of held back by its illusions. Start with what Coney Island is not going to be. It's not going to be Disneyland. It's not in a warm weather climate and surrounded by warm weather parking lots. That's not going to happen on Coney Island. You're not going to bring in that many cars.

Much as I love Luna Park and Steeplechase Park, beautiful as they were, much as I wish they were made of stone and survived, they're not coming back. It's limited by size and location. You're not going to get the masses of people out there like you once did. It's a long way from Manhattan.

The Weegee photo of the beach at Coney Island on July 4, 1947 shows 1 million people, one eighth of the city. That's just not going to happen again. Americans vacation differently. They're not going to go out there like they used to and buy bungalows on the beach anymore. We need to recognize that.

You don't want the city to become Venice, a big mausoleum or amusement park. You want it changing and growing but you want to keep that within certain boundaries and ideas of what you want it to be. Condominiums would change the essential nature of the place. The conundrum is how to keep Coney Island what it has always been at its best: a place where huge portions of the population come to mix and have fun. Honky-tonk but still a safe place to bring your family.

## What specific types of new amusements or entertainment uses would be ideal for helping to make Coney Island a popular 21st century entertainment district?

There's a plan to build an amusement park with giant waterslides. People say it's a bait and switch to tear down what's there and then, when no one comes, say, well we might as well build condos. I think that would be a shame. You'd have condos surrounded by the Cyclone, the Wonder Wheel and the ballpark. It seems contradictory but what it needs is good solid proprietors of small scale amusements. Do such people exist? I don't know. It's seems like something of a fly-by-night industry.

## What's needed to realize this vision?

The key is thinking it's not going to be something enormous: that Jane Jacobs idea of helping something evolve out of street culture. You try to put the elements in place to try to make it attractive to people. Don't let them just throw up a bunch of condos there. Stay tough with the developer there and just get across to him what we want there: a continuation of what we have.

## You've chronicled the old Coney Island in your novels, particularly *Dreamland*. What are some of the things about the area's history that stick out for you?

Coney through the years has changed greatly. It always has been contending for this middle ground of respectable middle class entertainment and more raunchy, raucous entertainment. Neither side won. It never became a vice capital and it never became Newport, Rhode Island. It became a place where the middle and working class could go.

Back in the 1910s, it had its own bowery. There were gangsters riding around and killing each other. They shot down Kid Twist. His murderer got a nine month sentence. He said: "I could do that standing on my head." That's where the phrase comes from.

The rides were about going and clutching onto your girlfriend or a woman you just met at the park. In an age when women's dresses covered their ankles, this was hot fun. A lot of those rides were just based on throwing people together. Uncovered legs in mixed company on the beach, not long after Queen Victoria died. It was visceral entertainment. It's such an American idea; a park just for amusements and taking this systematic business approach to fun. Early Coney Island had kind of wired a lot of the benches. If you stayed there too long, they'd give you a little vetz [electrical charge] to get you to stand up and keep moving, spend more money.

After World War I and the subway, which makes it a nickel to get out there, you have many more working class people coming out. It had been a once-or-twice-a-year summer excursion. After the subway, you could go out every weekend and sit on the sand with your six inches of space and people loved it. But then people have money and they start drifting away. You go down to Florida for vacation, you go to Europe. That leads to the slow death of Atlantic City and Coney Island. Then Coney brought back by Dick Zigun and others who've made it a fun place again. Mermaid Parade, rock'n'roll shows, freak shows, burlesque, kiddy rides, Brooklyn Cyclones. There's a nice pastiche there.

## Gary Dunning, executive director, Big Apple Circus

### What is your vision for Coney Island?

It's got to have several things. It's got to have multiple destinations. The beach or the boardwalk can't be the only reason to go there. It's got to have several attractions. I don't think it can only be the downscale of the downscale—I don't think it can be only the cheap stuff. If you really want to create a mix and excitement, it's got to have a mix of activities, restaurants, experiences, different things that you can do so you really get the true urban mix and diversity that makes New York so great. For example, you could use some outdoor space for the old amusement rides and at the same time have an outdoor space that is like Tivoli Gardens. It's a pretty upscale experience; they're still selling beer but it is a place where you would not be embarrassed to have a coat and tie on and stroll in the same way you wouldn't be embarrassed to have a pair of shorts and t-shirt. Same thing with entertainment: it's got to have a variety of options. There's got to be different forms of entertainment, some of them street performance, theatrical, some of them theaters, off-Broadway type stuff.

### Do you have any fears about the redevelopment or that Coney Island may lose its character?

I've heard, let's not Disney-fy it. But Disney's renovation of the New Amsterdam Theatre is stunning and that's a great addition to the city. The products they put in there are very high quality; in *The Lion King's* case, quite groundbreaking. What that means to me is: you don't want a destination that becomes divorced of the day-to-day life of those who live here. Some of us who live here will joke: I don't go near Times Square, I avoid it like the plague, it's just for tourists. Whether that is true or not, that's the joke, that's the perception. I don't think that's what we're after from Coney Island or any other place in the city; the thrill of New York City is you get that mix.

### What about retaining the 'kitsch' that Coney Island is known for?

I have memories of going to the sideshow, it's a hoot, it's just fun. Is that a basis on which to develop a whole urban plan in that area? I don't think so. I think that it has its place but it functions best in contrast to something else. And if all of it has no base to mirror itself against, that's when it starts drifting into being permanently kitschy and seedy. I think it has its role there but I think if it becomes its defining characteristic, it's going to have underdeveloped potential.

### What kind of potential is there for Coney Island?

The potential is for it to become a destination for New Yorkers to go to on a regular basis, not just the beach, not just the summer, but in the fall, in the fringe seasons, a destination you can go to for multiple experiences: theatrical, outdoor, a beautiful evening.

### What is the worst thing that could be done to redevelop Coney Island?

There are two extremes. One is: don't do anything and let the buildings deteriorate and let the boardwalk get downright dangerous and have it become sort of a place of refuge where no one actually wants to go there. That would be the worst. The other one is if you turned it into an unrecognizable shopping mall destination that could as easily be in Omaha or Mall of America. Then I think you've really lost an opportunity to respect the history that it came from and I think that defines architectural choices and styles of buildings. It would be like: we are going to honor Ellis Island but we are going to tear it down and build a Frank Gehry convention center.

### Does the Big Apple Circus fit with the current Coney Island?

Historically the carnivals and the circuses never really got along, and I would say our attractions are not of the sideshow variety. Our attractions are not about shock or a bearded lady and two headed man. But I think we fit in the current Coney Island and I think we could help develop in a historically respectful but also positive light. I think some would say, [the Big Apple Circus] is too common, that's too populist, it's not edgy enough. There is a certain edge to the current Coney Island that is anti-development, that is anti-mainstream, and while we are a circus and not high art, we are pretty mainstream if you think about it that way. But in the same way I look at things like the aquarium at one end of the boardwalk and KeySpan Park at the other, you look at us and go: it could be yet another anchor to family-centered affordable entertainment.

### Has the circus considered setting up a temporary or permanent location at Coney Island?

We've been around 31 years, and in recent times we have been in several conversations [about setting up in Coney Island]. All of them were definitely on the early, conceptual, exploratory side. We have performed in Brooklyn but never in Coney Island. Part of that is the issue of square footage – we carry our own theater, so there aren't that many places in urban environments that have three or four acres of open land you can displace for one week or ten weeks. The discussions have ranged with several folks; we have been approached by several developers with the idea of creating a permanent theater home there, which we would program. Those didn't go too far because the approach was frankly no different than a Hard Rock Café, which is: we have a building, we'll

build it out to certain specifications and then you'll sign a 30 or 40 or 50 year lease. But the short answer is that while the company has done well and we've succeeded, we don't have a million dollars lying in the bank to either build something ourselves or put it at risk on a long-term basis. And the developers' approach is that they were treating us like a commercial entity, which we are not. Our envisioning of anything there would have a large component of educational programs, shows for school kids throughout the year, certainly ramping up with more performances during the summer season, making the facility available to the community for use in an artistic sense.

We have also had conversations with a number of city officials, elected and appointed, to explore the same thing. I can't keep track of it, there are so many parcels of lands owned by so many different entities. We would absolutely consider it. We don't want to choose sides, we are very supportive of the city and their efforts and we think it could be a valuable complement to the program out there and could be a valuable complement to us and what we do.

## **Why would it make sense for that to be in Coney Island?**

It doesn't have to be there but there's a natural affinity between the timing and period of our art form with Coney Island and its history that that makes a fair amount of sense. There is a seasonality of Coney Island that we could adapt a performance schedule to fairly easily. At the same time, let's say there's a parcel of land right next to BAM at some arts collective or arts district. Could a circus building also work there? Sure it could. It's mostly about accessibility, density of population around it and amenities near it. Does it work at Coney Island if in fact we are the only attraction isolated out at the end of the pier? Then being on the end of the subway line, at the end of winter, could be an impediment.

## **Greg O'Connell, Red Hook-based developer of Beard Street warehouse and Fairway**

### **Some of the proposals for Coney Island include housing developments, retail corridors, and fewer amusements. What do you think?**

I'm not for any of that. We should do just the opposite. Look at the stadiums they're building for the Yankees and the Mets and the prices it will cost to go there. But go to KeySpan Park, and you see families. It's affordable and people are close to the athletes. I'm not following it closely enough to know all the details of what's going on, but I think once you start pushing out the people that can afford to go on the rides and so forth, then you're going to begin changing the complexion of it.

What makes Coney Island is that a mixture of people can use it. That's the whole key to something like that, to have many different places to eat, different rides and places that are affordable and different things that are free. The end result is that you are touching everyone no matter what their economic background. If you don't have money and you only have money for a hot dog, you still can enjoy it. That's what I am worried about with any new project, any money you put in, they're going to say: how do you get a return?

There's ways of setting these things up where maybe if the city owns a lot, they might not base it on the real estate taxes because they are not collecting it from a private individual. They might make it so many other ways. They never seem to emphasize the social impact of something like this. There's always the bottom line. But there are more things than that, that are important, especially for Coney Island.

### **Why is the social impact especially important for Coney Island?**

There are just not places like this around. Where do you go today? If you have a buck, you can go to a lot of places, but if you don't have that, what do you do? At Coney Island, we've got a great beach. But if you want to take your son for a ride on the bumper cars, it can't cost five or ten bucks. If you are thinking of New York City as a melting pot, there's value in having things like that.

### **The current plan calls for reducing the size of the amusement zone. What do you think of that idea?**

I know they're trying to compromise, but I think just the opposite. I think there should be more of an amusement area, just because it can handle more people, it's more attractive, and there's always something there for everyone. If you only have four or five or eight or ten rides, it could be a problem. You've got to have a cluster. Anything short of that, it won't survive, it will die a natural death because there's not enough of a volume.

## **What lessons from your experience in developing Red Hook apply to the development of Coney Island?**

You have to speak to everyone. You've got to talk to the children. Did they [city planners] interview any children? They have to talk to religious leaders, senior citizens, and everyone that had used Coney Island in the past and wants to use it now. Ask them: what do they want, what's their vision, what's their dream? Take the developer out of it, because if you listen to everyone else from the community, people that visit, people from Europe, you're going to get a pretty good idea of what's going to work and what's not going to work. You want to make it exciting, it's Coney Island after all. Then you say to the city 'this is what the people want' and then you plug the developer in. First the city, then the developer. If you really want something that's going to work, you've got to listen to them. You should listen first.

## **Are there any specific lessons from developing a waterfront area like Red Hook that you think are applicable to Coney Island?**

The boardwalk is so very important. Look at the older people, if you have nothing to do and you're old and you don't have money, you can still walk down to the boardwalk, sit on a bench, watch all kinds of people go by. That's part of Coney Island, so if you make it something that is other than that and all this highfalutin stuff, the mixture of people won't be there.

## **What does Coney Island represent to you, as a New Yorker and Brooklynite?**

It represents, for me, going back to my father bringing me down there. We could not afford to go to the Catskills or go to Florida or go on a cruise, and things like that, but we could afford to go to Coney Island and go to Nathan's for a hot dog and French fries and go on these rides because it was affordable. Also, when I think of Coney Island, I think of it as a place where years ago I'd drop my son off to play hockey at Abe Stark rink. I'd clip coupons from newspapers so we could get three hot dogs at Nathan's for the price of one. Then we did the bumper cars for fifty cents. The fun part of it is it's affordable for everyone, the working person, the middle class person.

# Martin Pedersen, Executive Editor, *Metropolis Magazine*

## **Does Coney Island need a major overhaul in your view?**

I truly love Coney Island, but at the same time you can't look at it with an open eye and not say this place can be a lot better. The question is: how do you make it better while keeping it true to itself?

## **What does that entail?**

Coney Island may be the last authentic place in the city. Times Square has been scrubbed clean and is now fully themed. But that hasn't happened to Coney Island. When you go out there you really do see all of Brooklyn; the mix of people is remarkable. If you go out there on a Saturday afternoon or a Friday night for the fireworks, the mix of people is exactly what you want in a city and it's increasingly rare. In Times Square you don't see a lot of locals. That not longer seems very real to me anymore. Coney Island seems utterly real. Still, it's a down on its heels amusement park. That's the difficulty.

## **What do you think should be done to preserve that authenticity?**

Making it a year-round destination spot is a realistic expectation. There's a way to mix small-scale amusements with some big development. So, first of all, I'd like to see it keep its local character—stay smaller-scaled with seasonal amusements. You can improve the park by getting more and newer rides and integrating new operators with the old ones. It doesn't have to be a zillion dollar project. It can afford to be a little ramshackle. It doesn't have to be like a theme park in the middle of New Jersey. That's not why you go there. There are a lot of assets there now, and I think they can be added to at not great expense.

## Charles Canfield, president, Santa Cruz Seaside Company and Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, often called the “Coney Island of the West”

### What do you think about the plans to redevelop Coney Island?

Somebody told me or I read that there is an interest of doing a retro Coney Island, or some smaller amusement park there. I think it would be really nice to preserve that, because Coney Island, in our industry, is really the grandfather of amusement parks. It's really what I look at as Americana, and I think it would be a shame to just build a whole lot of condominiums. There's a lot of famous things that came out of Coney Island—like Nathan's Hot Dogs, the old parachute jump, the Cyclone coaster. I would try to preserve whatever you can and make it a fun park, but really tie in the history of the old Coney Island. And you can. If you are starting from scratch, you've got the couple key elements, like the Cyclone and Wonder Wheel, of the old Coney Island.

### What are the important factors to consider when developing Coney Island?

In this day and age, our studies show that safety is the number one thing that visitors are looking for. You've got to have a safe environment for people and you've got to have a clean and nice operation. But saying all that, because you have so many people there, I think it would probably be hard for the park not to do well even if it was a seasonal venture. Even our park, when we get in the dead of winter and people are thinking about Christmas, you can still get some people down there. We keep our main arcade open, we have a bowling center that's close by, and if you design it well and you have a lot of people around, I could see it working.

You need to really upgrade it to a high level and you can theme it a little bit on the old, I would personally think. I think it's smart to keep the history going because that's a natural draw for people. There's nobody that doesn't know Coney Island, and you need to play off that strength.

### What do you think of the idea of having an indoor entertainment venue as part of the Coney Island amusement zone?

It changes the feel of the old Coney Island to bring it inside but I think if it's done correctly, it would complement it because you would have activities in there that might be year-round in nature, you might have a nice bowling center and put some activities that would be family-serving.

## Sharon Zukin, professor of sociology, Brooklyn College, author of *Loft Living* and *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture*

### What's your vision for Coney Island?

I think that small, locally-owned businesses and individual cultural entrepreneurs should be given priority. For example, Coney Island should be a showcase for Brooklyn-made ice cream, popcorn, hot dogs, with special “avenues” for the Latino food vendors who sell on weekends now at the Red Hook ball fields, Chinese vendors from Sunset Park, Russian and Polish food stalls and more.

### What else would you add to the mix that's not already there?

You could do a demonstration project for new entertainment technology developed at [Brooklyn-based] Polytechnic University (now part of NYU) and elsewhere in the city. There have been rumors of developing (once again) a Silicon Alley for video game entrepreneurs in New York—in Manhattan, I would guess—but Coney Island could be linked to media development labs and offer great test sites for the public.

Another Brooklyn institution that could have a branch in Coney Island is the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. I don't know if they sponsor as much research as the New York Botanical Garden, but one of the other could work on new plant systems to aid coastal land reclamation—at Coney Island!

## Charles Denson, author, *Coney Island: Lost and Found* and executive director/co-founder, Coney Island History Project

### What's your vision for remaking Coney Island as a popular 21st Century entertainment district?

They should recreate the Steeplechase Pavilion: a winter garden in the winter and a grand interior space in the summer.

The main thing is the amusement area should be low-rise so it permits evolution. Once you put in high-rises, it stops the evolution. As new entertainment technology becomes known, if it's low-rise, you can adjust.

Also, make it a world-class tourist destination.

The Coney Island History Project collects oral histories—thousands of people from around the world. Not one of them said they came to go shopping. All said they wanted to see the real Coney Island before it's developed.

### What do you think of the city's plan for redeveloping Coney Island?

I originally supported the city's plan but stop helping when they changed it. I was originally working with Lynn Kelly [president of the Coney Island Development Corporation] and EDC [New York City Economic Development Corporation]. They made so many mistakes from the beginning: They didn't put anybody from the amusement community on the CIDC. That was unfortunate and sent a message to the landowners.

The city has done some good things. They bought the B & B carousel and gave us the building for Coney Island USA. But the overall plan is just terrible. The city's plan is so similar to Joe Sitt's plan; it's hard to tell them apart. If they don't try to push the ULURP [Uniform Land Use Review Procedure] through, there really is room for a dialogue. They're not taking advantage of 60 acres that could be used for amusements.

And creating high-rise residential buildings, which will be there for 150 years—26 towers up to 26 stories, going right into the heart of the amusement zone—is going to obliterate the sight lines. It's going to be a picket fence of sight lines.

They're giving it up as a tourist destination and bringing in "retailtainment." Retailtainment is a very dated, retro '70s idea. Look at New Roc City in New Rochelle—an indoor amusement park gone bust. It's now a Target store.

### Has time passed Coney Island by?

Time hasn't passed it by. It still draws people. It still has that magic. It's unlike any other place in New York. It's because of the history. It's always been a place for people of small means, a place where everyone meets. The current plan is like saying, why not build on Central Park or the battlefield at Gettysburg? People still love Coney Island. It has made an amazing comeback and deserves preservation. It should be a World Heritage site.

### You've written extensively about Coney Island's history. When did you start documenting it?

I was born in 1953. I lived in Coney Island from 1956 to the early '70s. I had family living there through the '80s.

I started documenting it in 1965, studying the history. I consider it home. I watched the transformation over the years and documented it. I wrote the book that rewrote Coney Island's history. It was very personal. The whole middle part of the book is about how urban renewal affected people who lived there.

I got involved in the mid '90s when it looked like development was coming back in. I did a walking tour that identified all the landmark structures. Now we at least know what's worth saving. Bloomberg has put landmarking on hold in the neighborhood.

The main thing is Coney Island has become like a Heritage site: a gathering place of people from all around the city and the world. It's the last ungentrified place in New York City.

## Karrie Jacobs, former architecture critic for *New York* magazine, founding editor-in-chief of *Dwell*

### What's the single most important and distinctive quality, to your mind, about Coney Island?

Unlike any place else in this country where you'd go for that kind of amusement, it's not a corporate theme park but a whole bunch of little amusements. It's this cluster of small operators that gives the place its character.

### Do you think that's likely to change?

What seems probable given all this new investment is you're going to have one big amusement operator come in and replace this ragtag bunch of amusements with something big and new and shiny—and economically that may be successful, but I really hope they find a way to preserve the vernacular of Coney Island. Maybe the city should institute a zoning mechanism—a vernacular bonus—that would encourage a big amusement operator or developer to lease some percentage of their holdings to the small operators, new and old, so that some of the flavor of the neighborhood can be preserved.

### Is that a common way of doing it?

In the rehabbing of Grand Central a real effort was made to make sure that all the vendors selling food on the lower level had some connection to New York, that they were in some way local, and I think that really did a lot for the character of that place. You can write rules to encourage or even mandate that small-scale local merchants and creative people and entertainment people are still a part of the picture.

## Ellen Neises, associate principal of Field Operations, a landscape and urban design firm; project designer for the Fresh Kills Park master plan

### From an ecological perspective what kinds of challenges and opportunities does Coney Island present?

The challenge in re-imagining Coney Island, I think, is to create a landscape that keeps it urban, mixed, fanciful and loose. It has to be something that's apart from the regular city, something that's sensual, that's always changing. You have to respect the boardwalk but it would be nice to draw a contemporary landscape fabric from the neighborhoods and subway stops out to the beach. If you have the street grid and you fill up what used to be a really interesting public space with regular development—even if it's thoughtful about putting commercial on the first floor and mixing the uses—you'll end up with something a lot like every other good new development; it won't be especially distinctive to its place and history. Finding a different way to organize the buildings here, so that you're not just filling in the street grid, is going to be the way to honor the past, and make it feel like it is this very urban, exciting, earthy place.

### Can you think of specific ways of doing that?

Well, you're on the sea so you have a lot going for you when it comes to trying to engage storms and extreme weather—and using things like the salt water spray, what they call salt pruning. You can let the natural forces help shape the landscape and do some things that are not tame or tight—like lawn and hardscape—but things that register weather and extremes like floods and tide. Right now the boardwalk creates a great viewing platform out to the beach, but there's nothing that actually draws through from the city out to the water. But you could do that. The boardwalk doesn't have to be a dividing line. You could let the city and beach bleed into one another. What you want is a landscape that makes you feel like you had a totally immersive, one-day holiday every time you go out there.

## Setha Low, director of the Public Space Research Group at CUNY and author of *The Politics of Public Space*

### What's your vision for Coney Island?

My ideas are to have a “cultural center” where all the cultural groups that live in New York—whether in art, folklore, song, or important, iconic places—are represented. Coney Island has always been a center of culture in some sense, but its redevelopment could highlight New York's diversity. Programming would draw people to a series of cultural activities and also give New Yorkers a space for exhibiting their pride of place and culture. The other way to go would be to have a neighborhood center that highlights the diversity of neighborhoods. What are you going to do about Seagate and its interpretation? Remember that Coney Island and the beach/boardwalk is one of our last truly public spaces, so it will be important to protect the right of access and ability for it to function as a democratic space.

## Michael Singer, principal, Michael Singer Studio, an interdisciplinary environmental design and planning studio

### Do you have a particular connection to, or fondest memory of, Coney Island?

My grandparents lived in Brooklyn and I'd stay with them as a little kid and they would take me, of course, to Coney Island. We lived in Great Neck and when I was 10, 11, 12 years old, in the 1950s, my father would say, “Let's go to Nathan's for a hot dog!” And we'd drive down from Great Neck. That's my basic connection. It was a wonderland. The allure was powerful. I do remember the parachute jump, of course. I remember seeing people coming down from it as we approached. But I'd never do it. I was more a bumper car guy.

It's always been remarkable to me that you could take a subway and end up at the ocean. That amazes me. The extraordinary ocean air, the smells, the birds, this natural place of Coney Island and the Jamaica Bay wetlands. It's an exquisite ecology and its part of a huge metropolitan area. It's a wonder.

### What is your vision for Coney Island?

A coordinated set of natural, social, economic, cultural systems. They're all players. I would find a way to integrate the needs of the developer and of course the public recreational interests and combine that with the needs of the habitat and the natural systems.

### What's needed to realize this vision?

I would ask questions. Like: How are the birds participating in this place? The wind? The sunlight and moonlight? How is plant life participating here? I'd give them an equal role with the other program needs so that one doesn't outweigh the other. I'd ask: How are we going to power the place, how will we provide it with energy and heat? How can infrastructure become part of the place itself instead of being far away and brought in by conduits and lines and pipes? How can the buildings themselves clean their own air and recycle the water and sewage produced by them? I'm sure the city, the developers, the marketers, the retailers all have their plans. How do you get them to see Coney Island as a whole and integrate their plans with each other and the natural habitat? It can be done.

More questions? What are the needs of, say, a hawk that lives there. Storm water: where is it going to go and how can we make it a benefit instead of something to be gotten rid of? How does a place inform the people living in it about its past histories, its poetry? How do the city, developers, residents, amusement purveyors, merchants see themselves providing for these things?

We live in a different time and the carnival has an opportunity to take a different form. As a child, Coney Island was for me a place of wonder. And it still can be. But it doesn't have to mimic its historic past to do that.

**What are some of your concerns about existing plans for the redevelopment of Coney Island?**

I would like to make sure that Coney Island retains its character as the people’s beach, that there is continuous and uninterrupted access to the waterfront on every block, I would hope that we do not see the development of super blocks so that we can assure that the privatization of the beach—either in reality or in perception—does not take place. Unfortunately, too often our oceanfront is developed in such a way that we separate people from the ocean, we build private developments with private security forces that previously had public accessibility, but once developed with luxury housing they are psychologically and psychically closed off. I would hate to see Coney Island do that. I’d like it to attract a mixed group of people that is intergenerational and interracial going to the beach and using the adjoining recreational and commercial areas.

Years ago, in the 1980s when Cuomo was governor, the Pratt Center had a contract to select areas suitable for sports facilities and we selected Coney Island to locate both a basketball arena serving the high schools and colleges of Brooklyn as well as a minor league baseball facility. Keyspan Park has been built on that site. Coney Island may be a good alternative to consider if the Nets are to come to Brooklyn. Locating the Nets there and having the kinds of attractions there in the off months that bring a lot of people to the area would be an asset for area merchants and for the city.

**Are you hopeful about the future of Coney Island?**

I’m not hopeful because I don’t really see anybody organizing or working with those directly impacted—local residents, merchants and the communities that Coney Island serves. Developers are doing it from the perspective of their needs and the City Planning Department doesn’t really care about engaging in a community planning effort. There should be a major initiative to develop an inclusive community plan there. I would want to make sure that the kinds of things that are developed there attract people of all ages and all backgrounds and aren’t somehow screened and sanitized. It would be a shame if we screened out the kids who have traditionally come out there because they like rap music or any other type of music that attracts a diverse audience. Any development or plan for Coney Island has got to be inclusive and it’s got to include all groups in the planning process.