- November 2008

Coney Island Visions



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What is novelist Jonathan Lethem's vision for Coney Island? What does the CEO of Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens think the city should do to reinvigorate Coney? What about New York video game developer Eric Zimmerman? In this new report, 23 influential architects, writers, developers and amusement industry experts from New York and around the world offer their "vision" for Coney Island's future.

by Center for an Urban Future

This is an excerpt. Click here to read the full report (PDF).

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 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 theneighborhood. 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 report features 23 brief Q&A's, with the following individuals:

Jonathan Lethem, author, Motherless Brooklyn and The Fortress of Solitude

Eric Zimmerman, founder of video game development company Gamelab

Alexander Garvin, president and CEO, Alex Garvin & Associates

Mike Wallace, author of Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898

Michael Immerso, author, Coney Island: The People's Playground

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

Irwin Cohen, developer of the Chelsea Market

Dianna Carlin, founder of Lola Staar souvenir boutique and Dreamland roller rink

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

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

Paul Goldberger, architecture critic, The New Yorker

Kevin Baker, author, Dreamland: A Novel

Gary Dunning, executive director, Big Apple Circus

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

Martin Pedersen, executive editor, Metropolis Magazine

Charles Canfield, president, Santa Cruz Seaside Company

Sharon Zukin, professor of sociology, Brooklyn College, author of Loft Living

Charles Denson, author, Coney Island: Lost and Found; executive director, Coney Island History Project

Karrie Jacobs, founding editor-in-chief of Dwell

Ellen Neises, associate principal of Field Operations, a landscape and urban design firm

Setha Low, director of the Public Space Research Group at CUNY; author, The Politics of Public Space

Michael Singer, principal, Michael Singer Studio

Ron Shiffman, co-founder, Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development

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