Rezoning Coney Island
The crisis of routine-development and the struggles over “The people’s Playground”

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Abstract
The struggles over development in Coney Island cast light on the crisis of conventional development practices that crystallized in the times of New York’s housing boom, between Mayor Bloomberg’s first and second term. Coney Island holds a special role in history as a popular amusement park district. The recently approved rezoning plan replicates widely implemented development strategies featuring a residential and commercial expansion at the expense of the land currently zoned for amusements; it allows for the rise of condominium towers and large scale "entertainment-related" retail outlets, while permanently shrinking the amusement area from 61 to around 9 acres. In this paper, I argue that the reproduction of routine-development practices that proved profitable in a booming economy is likely to fail in the newly configured economic framework and in the peculiar local context. The ongoing recession calls for a different approach to development, one that favors economic diversification and capitalizes on local distinctive advantages. The flattening of Coney Island’s peculiar assets will prove detrimental to its livelihood in the years to come. To clarify this points, I will draw from recent studies of the Municipal Art Society in New York, which illuminate the potential of the amusement industry as a motor for economic development, contributing to the empowerment of local business in the area and to an overall diversification of the city’s plunging economy.

Introduction
Facing the Atlantic Ocean on the southern tip of the Brooklyn shore, the peninsula of Coney Island developed over the 19th and early 20th centuries from a seaside resort of Victorian hotels and private beaches to a popular midway of vaudeville theaters, bathhouses, arcades, dance halls, and thrill rides, which attracted New Yorkers, immigrants and visitors alike. Coney Island was renamed “The nickel Empire”, and “The People’s Playground”, because it provided accessible recreation for the working classes of New York and the entire world. In 1925, Giuseppe Cautela wrote: “When you bathe at Coney Island, you bathe in the American Jordan. It is holy water. Nowhere else in the United States will you see so many races mingle in a common purpose for a common good […]”.

For almost as many years, developers and public officials alike have struggled for space at this swath of southern Brooklyn shore, aiming to put it to more profitable use. The City has a long history of struggles for space at Coney Island: over the last 70 years, the land has become the bloody battlefield of conflicting redevelopment utopias, social unrests, political ambitions, and greedy speculations.

In 1938, city park commissioner Robert Moses assumed control of the area; in 1941 he widened the boardwalk inland, erasing dozens of arcade amusements and vernacular architectures, including the municipal bathhouse and the legendary Dreamland (Denson, 2007, 67). By making extensive use of eminent domain, he would later raze down several blocks of lively amusements at the site of the Dreamland’s fairground to clear land for both the New York Aquarium (1957), a scarcely attended enclosed venue, and the Abe Stark ice skating rink, both surrounded by vastly unused parking lots.
In 1953, while running the City's Slum Clearance Committee, Moses had several lots of land rezoned again to make room for high-rise public housing projects (Denson, 2007, 75): the Coney Island Houses, completed in 1956, were the result of a major land grab that favored private developers and destroyed more lots of amusements and hundreds of private houses. After the urban-renewal plans took place, and middle class houses were replaced with housing projects, the local crime rate soared, fewer people visited Coney Island, and many amusement owners abandoned their properties. Thanks to Moses’ destructive politics, Coney Island’s heyday was coming to an end. In 1964, Coney’s last remaining large theme park, Steeplechase Park, which had opened in 1897 and had thrived since then, shut down. The property was sold to Fred Trump, who planned to build luxury condominiums and spent several years battling in court to get the property rezoned to residential uses, but didn’t succeed. Realizing that there was a chance that the magnificent Steeplechase Pavillion, built in 1907, might be landmarked, he organized a
funeral party for the amusement industry in 1966, where bikini-clad girls handed out stones which Trump invited the press to cast through the stained-glass windows of the pavilion; later he had it bulldozed (Denson, 2007, 138).

In the 70s, Norman Kaufman, who had leased the property from Trump, created a little amusement park on the site and had plans to eventually resurrect the historic Steeplechase; in ’72 he bought back the original Steeplechase horse ride with plans to install it the following season. In ’79, however, the city purchased the lot from Trump and proceeded to harass Kaufmann with legal battles and trials, and eventually evicted the little amusement park in 1981. The property remained vacant for another 2 decades.

In the late 1970s, the city came up with plans to revitalize Coney Island by bringing-in gambling casinos, as had been done in Atlantic City. The city's plans backfired when the plan created a frenzy of land speculations where property was bought up and the few remaining rides cleared in preparation of reselling. Gambling eventually was never legalized in Coney, and the land again ended up with even more vacant lots.

In the mid 1980s, businessman Horace Bullard had plans for a vintage theme park based on the original Steeplechase; the plan was approved by the city in 1986. However, the deal was broken when Mayor Giuliani took office in 1994 and managed to build the Keyspan baseball stadium on its site.

Bullard, now no longer rebuilding Steeplechase Park, wanted to restore the glorious Thunderbolt roller coaster as part of a scaled-down amusement park. But Giuliani ordered an early-morning raid on the Thunderbolt, claiming that the coaster was in immediate danger of collapse, and illegally ordered it bulldozed. The structure that was supposed to be near collapse took several days to be torn down.

The demolition of the Thunderbolt, which had been seen by Coney enthusiasts as a monument to survival, epitomizes the struggle of the city against revival in Coney Island. History of urban development at Coney Island in the past 70 years is the history of its progressive obliteration: arrogance of city planners, political greed, and plain conflicts of interests have reduced Coney island to wasteland over the years, with a rush to its complete disintegration during the second Bloomberg Administration.
I. Coney Island Today: Social Texture and Local Distinctiveness

With its fanciful rides, bizarre sideshows and visionary architectures, Coney Island has inspired and mirrored a golden age unique to the history of American popular culture. The signs of this cultural legacy are still alive in today’s burlesque and freak shows, in the parades and the music festivals, in the historical landmarks, in its unique architecture, and in its democratic sense of place. Like the haven and playground of the immigrants and the working class in past decades, Coney Island is still a welcoming place for people of all colors, ages and incomes.

Despite its current dilapidated condition and the loss of many of its open-air amusements, Coney Island still offers attractions that continue to draw millions of visitors, including its beach and boardwalk, the Cyclone roller coaster, the Wonder Wheel, the open frame steel relic of the Parachute Jump (which was built for the 1939 New York World’s fair in Flushing Meadows and then brought to Coney), Nathan’s Famous hot dogs, and the freak shows and parades organized by Coney Island USA, a prominent non-profit organization.

Coney Island is a fairly tight-knit community composed mostly of elderly residents who occupy the older housing stock and younger, immigrant families living in the public housing units. As of the 2000 census, there were 51,205 people living in Coney Island: 40.3% were White, 44.2% were Black or African American, 18% were Hispanic or Latino, 3.8% were Asian. To the west of the amusement district is the largely Hasidic community of Seagate; to the north, a patchwork of housing projects, small businesses, and row homes and geriatric facilities; and to the east, Little Odessa, the largest community of Russians in the United States. Coney Island is first and foremost a “functioning year-round Brooklyn neighborhood with its own rituals, regulars and rules” (Matassa, 2006, 8-10). The amusement district is largely comprised of small business owners with longtime connections to the neighborhood, a notable few of whom still live above their businesses. Coney Island is still predominantly a working-class neighborhood, with a median household income of $21,281 (as of 1999).

Coney Island is not a corporate theme park but a mosaic of small, fragmented amusements. It’s the clustering of small operators that gives the place its peculiar character. The Coney Island beach, boardwalk and surrounding neighborhood remain open 24 hours a day, seven days a week (technically the beach and boardwalk are closed from late evening until early morning, but these
prescriptions are largely disregarded and un-enforced). Coney Island’s amusement area is one of the few in the country that is not centrally owned, is un-gated and requires no general admission, allowing visitors to wander freely among the rides and concessions. These freedoms are unique with regard to many of New York City’s other public spaces, most notably city parks, which nowadays impose strict curfews and limit access through fences and gates.

Coney Island still attracts a predominantly native tourism from Brooklyn and the New York Metropolitan Area. Here, tourism “moves beyond the visual consumption of tableaux images of what the city should be, as in Times Square, into sensually chosen experiences of what the city is or could be, arising through the unregulated freedom of personal practice”. (Matassa, 2006: 32-35). Visitors wander, largely unsurveilled, through a thick urban fabric which encourages a multitude of playful practices and performances of tourism.

In short, Coney’s singularity lays in its legendary role as the playground for New York’s working classes, which still allows for a playful release from the homogeneity of the controlled and commodified city; in its distinctiveness, which attracts crowds of tourists and citizens alike; in its neighborhood-feeling; in its diverse ethnic fabric, and in its democratic sense of place. Above all, its distinctive economic advantages lay in its invaluable potential as a locally based, functioning, and diversified amusement district.

II. The Struggle for Space at Coney Island

Amid ups and downs as precipitous and harrowing as a ride on the Cyclone roller coaster, the “People’s Playground” has somehow managed to survive over 70 years of relentless attacks by city officials and private developers. However, the summer of 2009 will probably be the last for Coney Island as we know it.

On July 29th 2009, the New York City Council approved the controversial rezoning plan for Coney Island. Despite dozens of public hearings, and the overall negative responses from amusement advocates (“Save Coney Island” - a grassroots community organization - in the forefront), Coney Island residents, and the thorough critiques of authoritative historians and urban think-tanks such as the Municipal Art Society, the plan was approved without any significant changes from its original layout.

According to Treiman (2009), “Mayor Bloomberg appears to be finally on the cusp of completing the work of Moses and Trump”: the plan foresees the radical de-mapping of over 61 acres currently zoned for amusements and their reduction to about 9 acres.

The preparatory process for the rezoning started in September 2003, when the Mayor, the City Council and the Brooklyn Borough President formed the Coney Island Development Corporation (CIDC) to articulate an economic development strategy for the area. The City had decided to revitalize Coney Island as a potential site for the 2012 Olympics, but when the bid for the Olympics was lost, the Coney Island Development Corporation came up with a plan to rezone several lots to residential uses, in order to lure developers into the area. Just shortly before the Strategic Plan was released in September 2005, a politically connected private developer, Thor Equities, purchased a huge property west of the current amusement area for $16 million dollars. Owning property that was now earmarked for rezoning to residential uses, Thor could flip it the same year to another developer, Taconic, for a $72 million profit. Between 2003 and 2006, Thor proceeded purchasing almost every piece of property (about 10 acres) inside the traditional amusement area. In the winter of 2007 and then again in 2008, Thor evicted dozens of small businesses and ride operators, and purchased the last remaining park of Astroland by Carol Albert, who shut it down at the end of 2008.

Thor Equities’ real plans for Coney have always been unclear, largely because they have changed significantly from year to year. In 2005, when the economy was booming, detailed renderings of a resort area showing luxury high-rise condo towers with retail on the ground floor were released with the promise to bring a Bellagio Hotel – Vegas style development to South Brooklyn. Four years later, in 2009, Thor presented a more conventional, vague design which included what seemed to be a small gated amusement park, high rise hotels and large retail stores.
Moreover, Thor Equities’ real intention of building at Coney Island was always severely biased by a bad reputation of acquiring property, requiring zoning changes and then flipping the land to other developers for a profit - as he had done during the first Bloomberg term with the Albee Square Mall land in downtown Brooklyn - purchased for 25 millions in 2001, and resold in 2007 to Arcadia Realty Trust for 5 times the amount.

In November 2008, the City had offered Thor $110 million for the land needed to realize their plans of a nine-acre outdoor amusement district, but negotiations have stalled when Thor rejected the offer, demanding more than double the amount (Miller, 2009). The City has also silenced the possibility of using eminent domain to seize the land, even though the Environmental Impact Statement clearly states that land “could be acquired through condemnation, as necessary.” Thor Equities’ requests to the City to boost the maximum retail size limit in the rezoning plan from 2,500 square feet to 10,000 square feet have led many critics to assume the developer wants to turn the historic amusement areas into a charmless mega mall on the ocean. It was exactly the city-initiated planning process for Coney Island that sparked the frenzy of land speculation that has devastated the amusement district. Once it appeared that the zoning status quo would change, Thor swooped in, evicting small businesses to prepare the land for the extraction of value.

In short, the City’s plan has rewarded Thor’s destructive behavior by upzoning the developer’s land, increasing its value and allowing him to build high-rises in the heart of the amusement district. According to Juan Rivero, advocate of the “Save Coney Island” coalition, “It was irresponsible and tactically stupid for the city to make zoning concessions before being close to a deal to acquire property. The city could have easily played hardball with Thor Equities and used the line they use with everyone else - this or nothing. Instead, they blinked, and ended up with a plan that, by upzoning Thor’s land, made the realization of amusement-related goals far more expensive. The difference between what the city would have paid pre-rezoning and what it will have to pay post-rezoning is going to be absorbed by the public. The rezoning, in other words, has been a form of “sponsored speculator subsidy program” that benefits a private developer whose history in Coney Island has been that of systematically trying to destroy it.”

While Thor has been massively responsible for the blighting of present-day Coney Island, according to Treiman (2009) “it is the city’s plan that poses the greatest danger to the amusement district’s future. Coney Island’s amusement district has survived the pressures of the New York
City real estate market thanks to its special C7 – amusement only zoning. Land that is rezoned to allow for other uses, however, will be lost to amusements forever.

As of today, the outdoor amusements at Coney Island occupy around 3 acres. However, before the plan’s approval, over 61 acres were still zoned for outdoor amusements, while the legendary Coney Island of the past had over 100 acres of parkland, including rides, arcades, bathhouses, hotels, houses and retail. The approved rezoning plan shrinks the amusement area in perpetuum.

III. The Coney Island Rezoning Plan

The comprehensive plan developed by the Department of City Planning, in partnership with the New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC), the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) states that “it will establish a framework for the revitalization of the Coney Island amusement area and the surrounding blocks. The plan builds upon the few remaining amusements to create a 27-acre amusement and entertainment district that will reestablish Coney Island as a year-round, open
and accessible amusement destination. Outside of the amusement area, the plan provides new housing opportunities, including affordable housing, and neighborhood services. However, the proposed zoning plan for Coney Island actually aims at reducing the area’s amusement character while increasing its residential destination. While over 61 acres are currently zoned for open-air amusements and rides, the plan proposes shrinking the parkland to 12 acres and to preserve around 9 acres for outdoor rides. The rezoning covers 19 blocks bounded by the New York Aquarium to the east, West 24th Street to the west, Mermaid Avenue to the north and the Riegelmann Boardwalk to the south. It proposes the demapping of 9.30 acres of currently zoned parkland at KeySpan Park. The demapped parkland would be replaced by the mapping of two parks along the Riegelmann Boardwalk: a 9.39 acre park that would be developed as the amusement area, and a 1.41 acre neighborhood park. The plan aims to generate 4,500 new units of housing outside the amusement area (of which 900 may be affordable to middle income households if the developers choose to take advantage of the voluntary inclusionary zoning tool) and roughly 500,000 square feet of new retail. The rezoning facilitates new indoor amusement uses as well as hotels, retail and restaurants. To the north and west of the amusement area, the plans fosters the redevelopment of vacant and underutilized land, providing opportunities for new housing as well as a range of neighborhood retail and services. The proposal establishes a new special zoning district, the “Special Coney Island District”, encompassing 17 blocks located between the Aquarium, the Riegelmann Boardwalk, Mermaid Avenue and West 22nd Street. The Special Coney Island District will include use, density, bulk and parking regulations to guide development of the amusement and entertainment district as well as the residential developments outside of the amusement area. The special district will be comprised of three subdistricts, each with its own special zoning regulations:

- Coney East (the remaining amusement area), where the rezoning will broaden the range of allowed uses, including hotels, open and enclosed amusements with limited accessory retail, restaurants, and service uses. On Surf Avenue, towers will be allowed at defined corner locations. Maximum tower height would range from 150 feet closer to the Wonder Wheel to 270 feet (Parachute Jump height) closer to KeySpan Park.

- Coney West (now mainly vacant) will be rezoned to allow for residential uses with ground-floor retail along Surf Avenue and new uses along the Boardwalk. On Surf Avenue, commercial ground floor uses would be mandatory and 20 percent of the frontages would have to be dedicated to entertainment-related uses. Towers would be allowed in defined locations, with the highest tower placed at the corner of Surf Avenue and the intersecting streets. For developments that participate in the Inclusionary Housing Program, point towers would be able to rise to 270 feet.

- Coney North/Mermaid Avenue will be rezoned to allow for residential uses with ground-floor retail along Surf Avenue and Mermaid Avenue.

The rezoning permits new indoor amusement uses as well as hotels, water parks, entertainment, restaurants and about 500,000 square feet of new retail. It also allows for a line of 27-storey towers along the amusement area and the development of more than 1,750 housing units in Coney North, adjacent to existing residential areas, and roughly 2,700 units west of KeySpan Park, with the potential for 900 units of affordable housing. However, the proposed voluntary density bonus may prove of little use: similar bonuses that exist in other parts of the city are not being utilized by developers in sufficient numbers to create a significant number of new affordable units. More units would be generated by mandating developers to build a proportion of affordable housing, instead of establishing a voluntary incentive (Busà, 2008, 2009c).
The plan also allows developers to obliterate Coney Island’s handful of surviving historic buildings, including Nathan’s Famous and others that are over a century old. The proposed high-rise hotels would forever transform a skyline currently defined by historic landmarks like the Wonder Wheel and the Parachute Jump. The tiny amusement park, overshadowed by soaring high-rises, “will be too small to accommodate new, iconic rides and would not leave much space for future generations of visionaries to carry forward Coney Island’s traditions of inventiveness and artistry” (Treiiman, 2009).

Coney Island has always been primarily an open-air seasonal destination, yet the plan proposes to transform it into a year-round destination with indoor entertainment. Coney Island has always had multiple amusement operators, yet the rezoning foresees a new management carried by a single operator, effectively dismissing the few remaining local businesses. The approved plan replicates rezoning patterns that have already proved detrimental to the local economy in other areas of New York City; and this in a moment of crisis where the chances of success of such models seem even scarcer, as will be shown in the next chapter.

IV. The crystallization of the practice of rezoning in New York City and its shortcomings

The extensive use of rezoning has marked the shift from Bloomberg’s first term (with Daniel L. Doctoroff as Deputy Mayor for economic development and rebuilding) to its second term, when Amanda Burden was appointed head of the Department of City Planning, which also made her chair of the City Planning Commission. It marked the shift from the rush for mega-plans (Doctoroff had pushed for the 2012 Olympics, the Yankee Stadium and the Atlantic Yards development in downtown Brooklyn) to what was proposed as a more subtle manipulation of the city fabric through zoning changes. In times of economic uncertainty, massive master plans had been slowly falling from grace: the still stand at Ground Zero and the bitter downscaling of the Atlantic Yards are illuminating examples of the failure of massive redevelopment schemes in the late 2000s.

By eschewing the rigidity of large scale master plans in favor of fragmented interventions; by increasing residential density via urban-infill; by making use of specific cosmetic prescription to keep street life “vibrant”, and by bill boarding the rhetoric of a new urbanity which aims to capitalize on the historic tradition and cultural potential of the areas undergoing redevelopment, the practice of rezoning has represented a strategy which encountered particular favor by the
second Bloomberg administration, and has proven as well appealing to various interest groups
and to the economic elites.
Whether in the form of upzoning, allowing for increasing residential density and mixed-use
developments, or of downzoning, limiting bulk and scale of new developments in order “to
preserve neighborhood character”, over one sixth of the total land in the five boroughs has been
rezoned in the past seven years - more than the last six administrations combined - for a total of
94 rezoning plans since 2002, creating the most sweeping revision of land use regulations
throughout the city’s five boroughs since the Zoning Resolution was rewritten in 1961.
As Susan Fainstein (2005) puts it, “in their physical manifestations, which in many cases
incorporate mixed use developments and retention of the street grid, the efforts underway
represent the absorption of Jane Jacobs’s invective against the dullness created by city planning
under urban renewal. But even though they are not Modernist in their physical forms, they are in
their functional aims. As in the first stage of urban renewal, they represent the imprint of a
master builder rather than community-based planning. Participation by citizens is restricted to
their testimony at public hearings, listening to presentations by the plans’ progenitors, and the
provision of advice by the Community Board for the affected area.”
The production of a new urbanity through rezoning therefore signals a re-assertion of top-down
forces of urban planning in reshaping the urban environment, although in a radically new guise:
the paramount use of the rezoning tool under Bloomberg has set new standards for
redevelopment, changing the face and the social character of entire districts through different
levels of more or less “smooth” manipulation of the urban fabric.
This practice of development has been codified in a narrow set of private/public endeavors: the
public sector sets up a comprehensive rezoning plan, often allowing for increased residential and
commercial density, and generously subsidizes developers who chose to build in the area through
a range of tax exemption programs (421-a above all), granting extra bonuses if they decide to set
a percentage of residential units as “affordable” through the “inclusionary zoning” program. The
“inclusionary zoning” tool is strictly voluntary, at the discretion of the developer. Hence, very few
developers have profited from this and other public subsidies, while most have focused on
development of luxury condominiums and big retail outlets for an ever increasing demand set by
a rising class of affluent “city consumers” (Busà, 2009a). Moreover, affordable housing in New
York City is being built with public subsidies: these subsidies are limited, especially in hard
economic times when the demand for affordable housing goes up and available subsidies go
down (Angotti, Marcuse, 2008).
Through the implementation of the “inclusionary zoning” tool, the Department of City planning
maintains that through March 2009, the building of 85.089 units of affordable housing has been
started under the “New York Housing Marketplace” plan, putting the City on track to achieving
the Mayor’s goal of creating and preserving 165,000 affordable housing units by 2013. However,
the few units under construction are simply unable to keep pace with the larger number of those
lost: a May 2007 report conducted by Housing Here and Now, a coalition of affordable housing
advocates, stated that only between 2002 and 2005, nearly 205,000 housing units affordable to
families at 80 percent or below the city’s median income level were lost, due to expiring rent
stabilizations programs or increasing rents.
My research on rezoning plans which have been recently adopted within the whole metropolitan
area, has shown how in several instances the city has gone back on many of its promises
(affordable housing, bulk and height limitations, vibrant street life, above all). For instance, my
findings (Busà, 2009) on the rezoning of 125th street in Harlem, have shown following general
results:

1 – The plan has been produced from the top-down. It hasn’t been based on any comprehensive
review of community needs and priorities. City officials and the real estate and corporate industry
are the leading actors behind rezoning, City Planning advisors are adding to the mix a set of
creative strategies aimed at reinforcing New York’s “urban feeling” in the areas undergoing
development. “The Planning Commission officially sets the policy, but it relies heavily on
recommendations by the planning department staff and is dominated by mayoral appointees (7 out of 13)” (Angotti, 2008). Grassroots organizations and civic initiatives are *de facto* excluded from the decisional process. Despite dozens of public hearings, none of the several civic coalitions which opposed the 125th street rezoning plan or asked for amendments, has been able to substantially affect the plan.

2 - The commitment of City Council for affordable housing - one of the most dramatic matters in New York City during the Bloomberg administration - is proving highly volatile and in practice ineffective. In the case of the 125th street rezoning, incentives are provided to developers who decide to set off 20 percent of the units as affordable to households making up to 80 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI is a federal index for the entire metropolitan area). However, the median income in marginalized districts facing redevelopment is often way lower than that of the whole metropolitan area. This is the case of Harlem, where, as a result, the rezoning is likely to produce units affordable to only 5 percent of Harlem households (200 units out of about 4500 are for incomes of $30,750 dollars or less). Moreover, the inclusionary zoning tool is based on voluntary programs; since none of these units are mandated, it’s questionable how many of these affordable units would even be built. As the system in use for the provision of affordable housing in the plan for Coney Island is a replica of the one implemented at 125th street, the result won’t be different. Even here, the Area Median Income is significantly lower than in the rest of the city ($21,281 as of 1999, according to the 2000 census), hence it is unlikely that the new units will be at all affordable for Coney residents.

3 – The 125th street rezoning, even as it claimed to limit bulk and height of new constructions, has resulted in the opposite. The plan includes explicit height limitation and other provisions aimed at respecting existing buildings in the surrounding area. However, the older zoning also had implicit height caps that in practice kept tall buildings from being built in certain areas: developers could only reach a certain height because of zoning restraints over the maximum amount of floor area in new buildings. But the new zoning, increasing the allowed floor area, may encourage property owners to demolish smaller buildings and build taller ones - even with the new height limit. Portions of 125th street had two to three-story commercial buildings before the rezoning; however, after the rezoning passed, dozens of renderings for high-rises were released by developers, and construction sites for condominium towers (many of whom are now stalled because of the recession) mushroomed everywhere along the thoroughfare.

4- Economic restraints and permissive politics haven’t allowed for a consequent planning through rezoning, giving often *carte blanche* to the developers, whose redevelopment plans could very easily circumvent downzoning restraints whenever necessary. Many examples were seen during the rezoning of Harlem (developers at Harlem Park project bought air rights from neighboring areas in order to build higher - 380 feet instead of the allowed 290 - before the whole plan fell apart in the midst of the financial crisis).

5- As in the plan for Coney Island, also at 125th street there hasn’t been a comprehensive plan to avoid the forced relocation of small businesses, and no mention of the likelihood that local residents will benefit directly from new jobs created through the rezoning. The character of New
York City is being eroded by the increasing proliferation of chain retail and franchising outlets that pay minimum-wages and do not generate lively street life. In the Harlem plan, requirements and restrictions that seek to preserve active street life, and that locate deadening bank space, lobbies and non-active uses away from the ground floor, are commendable. Yet the plans offers no economic strategy aimed at preserving and encouraging locally-owned retail and at fostering attractive local jobs.

The frenzy of speculations bred by the rezoning process, which has led to hundreds of evictions and the closure of dozens of small family owned retail, coupled with the wave of foreclosures that hit Harlem in 2008, has dramatically harmed 125th street, making it less appealing, less diverse, and less empowered than it was before the rezoning. Hundreds of townhouses rashly purchased during booming times, with the promise of reselling them soon after luxury renovations, stand now empty and in disrepair - their former tenants displaced further out in the outer Boroughs, especially the Bronx or Brooklyn (Busà, 2008).

Concluding with Tom Angotti (2008): “This is a good time for the city to rethink its approach to both community planning and citywide planning, starting with the real needs and priorities of its residents and workers instead of the amount of floor area that can be built. Instead of wearing out people with endless informational meetings and public hearings -- sessions that result in few, if any, actual changes to the city’s plans -- how about a real dialogue between residents and government about the needs and priorities of communities? How about planning for long-term sustainability?”

V. MAS’ Recommendations: The Amusement District as an economic engine

The flattening of urban distinctiveness may prove counter-productive in a city in crisis, which needs to capitalize on its own distinctive advantages and economic assets. To further reinforce this point, I will draw from authoritative studies of the Municipal Art Society in New York, which illuminate the potential of the amusement industry as a motor for economic development, contributing to the overall diversification of New York’s plummeting economy, crucial to the city’s recovery after the Wall Street meltdown.

The Municipal Art Society is an urban think thank that promotes smart development, design and preservation for the city of New York. In early 2007, it launched the initiative Imagine Coney, which included several public workshops, a public call for ideas, thorough economic analysis and a charrette with a team of international experts, including amusement industry leaders, to generate a more imaginative and more sustainable vision for development at Coney Island. The result of this body of work was released in MAS’ Testimony for the New York City Planning Commission of May 15, 2009. The document highlighted several key points for a sustainable development at Coney, including:

- Capitalization on the amusements industry, in order to enhance Coney Island’s status as an economic engine that creates jobs, particularly for residents;

- Creation of a 25-acres amusement park. Ideally, the amount of acreage would be much higher; the historical size of the Coney Island Amusement District was over 100 acres; the City should seek to create the largest possible area set aside for open-air amusements. According to the rezoning plan, the new mapped parkland would have a capacity of 5,000 visitors at one time, or 1 million annually. An amusement park of this size would not have sufficient space for large new rides. The existing large rides like the Cyclone roller coaster and Wonder Wheel would be likely to remain the most significant “signature” rides of Coney Island. To allow for future expansion of the
Amusement Park, the existing C7 (amusement only) zoning should be retained for areas which should ultimately be publicly owned;

- Design of technologically innovative new rides and amusements, to keep Coney Island's historical role as a center of experimentation and inventiveness alive (in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, fanciful new rides, the hot dog, electric lights, baby incubators and roller coasters were all pioneered in Coney Island);

- Preservation of Coney Island's architectural heritage, through aggressive preservation of historic structures and consideration of how to reinvent the amusement experiences of Coney Island's past. Much of the public appeal of Coney Island lies in its heritage; it is important that significant remaining structures be protected by designating them as landmarks or as part of a historic district and ensuring height and bulk limits through zoning that lessen the incentive for property owners to demolish them;

- Generating employment opportunities for local residents. Fully realizing the potential of the Amusement District would do the most to create jobs for the community, particularly if amusement, hotel and entertainment operators focus on filling vacancies locally.

- Preservation of the Coney Island amusement experience by keeping large-scale, general retail out of the amusement district through zoning regulations and prescriptions.

MAS' recommendations help emphasize the underlying contradictions of a city plan that claims to capitalize on the "brand" of Coney island, while at the same time it radically scales down its primal vocation as an amusement park.

The 20th-century leisure phenomenon that is the theme park industry owes its development to several influences, including the world’s fairs and exhibitions of the 19th and 20th century, but has one of its most legendary progenitors at Coney Island. By 1919, there were more than 1,500 amusement parks operating in the US, with the Coney Island complex arguably the most widely visited and admired. Still today, hundreds of parks around the world are inspired by the former magnificence of Coney. According to Save Coney Island spokesman Juan Rivero: "There are numerous places around the globe that have built glorious parks that pay tribute to Coney Island.
Here, where we have the original, the city has been all too happy to shrink it out of existence.”

Luna Park, in Melbourne, Australia, features a giant entrance gate inspired by the iconic face of George C. Tylou, who founded Steeplechase Park in 1897; “Coney Island Park” in the Cincinnati Area features a range of classic rides which pay tribute to the legend of Coney Island.

The amusement industry is thriving even in times of crisis: because of the role they play as an interlude from the pressures of daily life, parks and attractions tend to fare relatively well during a recession. According to the TEA/ERA Attraction Attendance Report (2008), which analyzes the performance of the top theme parks around the world, urban and regional parks (such as a future, fully functioning Coney Island) have been less impacted by the recession than “destination parks” because of their proximity to their market pools (populated urban cores). According to the same report, in 2008 the number of total visits to the top 20 parks in North America amounted to 122.7 million.

Unfortunately, the City has rejected the Municipal Art Society’s call for a larger amusement area that triplicates what the city was proposing to approximately 27 acres. The Prater, in Vienna, has a surface of 50 acres; Tivoli gardens, in Copenhagen is about 20,5 acres; Disneyland is around 80 acres; Magic Kingdom occupies 107 acres, Epcot Center covers 300 acres, Disney-MGM Studios is 154 acres. A new Coney Island with 9 acres for amusements won’t be able to compete with any of the great amusement parks worldwide.

By disregarding the potential of the amusement industry as a motor for economic development, the plan is likely to prove socially detrimental and financially unviable in the long run.

VI. Conclusions: The Coney Island Rezoning Plan and the blindness of routine-development

The recently approved plan for Coney Island is paradigmatic of a broader framework of commodification of the urban space and of the urban experience, which was initiated right after the fiscal crisis in the early 70s, and has been strongly boosted by the Bloomberg administration in recent years. Alongside undertaking pervasive forms of economic and social restructuring, such process has been carried out by means of a relentless manipulation of the city’s built environment via urban planning, architecture and new tools of urban management and rebranding efforts. My studies (Busà, 2009a) are showing how the Mayor’s agenda for New York is creating a new commodified urbanity for the wealthy at the same time as it has narrowed access to housing and other services for the middle- and lower income households. It is also dramatically cutting subsidized- and public housing programs for the poor, at the same time as it provides a tax-exempt playground for speculators and developers in the luxury housing market.

In Darwinian fashion, richer households have moved in over time, while lower income households have been forced out. Indications of such a trend during the Bloomberg era abound. According to the latest findings from the “Center for an Urban Future” (2009), an authoritative urban policy think tank, the city’s middle-class is in full flight: over 150,000 middle income residents left New York City in 2006 alone, driven away by the highest rent, food, child care and utilities bills in the US. As of 2008, the average rent was $2,800, which is 53 percent higher than San Francisco, the
second-most expensive city in the country. In the same year, the average apartment in Manhattan sold for more than $1.4 million (the median price is $900,000). In the third quarter of 2008, only 10.6 percent of housing in the New York City region was affordable to people earning the median area income. In 2009, homeless rates are at record highs; the city's overstretched shelters now take in an average of 36,000 people each night.

Bloomberg’s “luxury city” has been expanding unrelentingly out of Manhattan into the outer Boroughs till the third quarter of 2008. However, in a city in crisis with a frozen housing market, to what “city consumers” is the newly repackaged Coney Island supposed to cater? The crisis, and the ongoing lack of consumer demand may provide a chance for the city to rethink its approach to planning, starting to focus on needs and priorities of its residents and workers instead of the volatile and moody desires of an international class of affluent “city consumers” (Busà, 2009a).

Plenty of indicators are showing that consumer demand is falling precipitously. In 2009, the Manhattan real estate market has begun a steep slide. It parallels the decline in New York’s financial services industry, and housing analysts contend that the drop in real estate prices may continue long after other markets heal. In this year’s first quarter, selling prices of co-ops and condominiums in the New York Metropolitan Area have plunged. New York has an unemployment rate of 7.4 percent as of December 2008, compared with 5.1 percent two years ago. A hemorrhage of 294,000 jobs - 46,000 from Wall Street alone is projected by the summer of 2010.

The Plans for Coney Island casts light on the current crisis of routine-development as it’s been conceived and carried forward during the booming years of Bloomberg’s mayoral terms. It envision a comprehensive upgrading of the commercial and residential offer, achieved through development of luxury condominium towers and franchising retail outlet; regardless - except for a few “cosmetic” prescriptions, of the distinctive economic, social and historical character of the district. It subsidizes developers through generous tax exemptions, or downright political favors as it did with Thor Equities. The lack of a more imaginative and participative approach to development for Coney Island also sheds light on the top-down approach and on the narrow scope of urban development policies during the Bloomberg era, as they are set forth by an elite of “city producers” (Busà, 2009a) - city officials, politically connected real estate owners, and the corporate industry - without any effective citizen participation. The usual package of urban
redevelopment with its array of chain retail megastores and condo-buildings has been so pervasive in New York’s city planning in the recent decade that no actors, with the only exception of MAS, have considered giving the plan a more creative and more inclusionary design. However, the normalized development practice which changed the face of New York City in the times of relentless growth of the real estate industry is likely to prove counter-productive in the newly configured economic framework and in Coney Island’s peculiar local context.

At the recent commemoration of his mother Jane Jacobs (on July 13th 2009, Hudson Street in the West Village has been renamed “Jane Jacobs Way” in her honor), Ned Jacobs said that he is “appalled” by the City’s plan: “this rezoning plan does not appear to reflect the urban values and planning principles she espoused. These include sensitivity and integration with the scale, character and performance of existing neighborhoods and their established uses; the need to retain aged but serviceable buildings for the sake of economic diversity and continuity, as well as for their history and charm; the benefits of planning and redevelopment based on organic, iterative change, and the inherent dangers of top-down urban renewal-type schemes [...]”

After the adoption of the rezoning plan, on July 30th 2009, City Planning Commissioner Amanda Burden stated: “Today is a triumphant day for Coney Island and the City. Coney Island’s fans in New York City and throughout the world can rest assured that the People’s Playground will in fact reclaim its title as the world's most celebrated open, affordable and accessible urban amusement park [...] The plan will reestablish the area as South Brooklyn’s economic engine, bringing new jobs, retail services and affordable housing to the Coney Island community.”

To those opposing the rezoning, the City promises again that this plan will provide jobs, in a moment where unemployment in New York City has reached historical highpoints. But the history of urban development in the last 70 years of Coney Island has been the history of the progressive destruction of the only industry that Coney island possessed - the destruction of the amusement area and of all related jobs for Coney residents.
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