Since the mid-1800s, the public has associated Brooklyn’s Coney Island with its famous boardwalk and amusement parks. However, after World War II, the area began to decline as a truly popular attraction. The famous Luna Park closed in 1946, and Steeplechase Park, the last of the major parks, closed in 1964.

As Coney Island declined as a resort location, it was rezoned as a residential area, and many low-income housing projects were built, beginning in 1954. CHPC uncovered fascinating archival documents and maps that tell the story of housing development and neighborhood transformation in Coney Island in the 1950’s, 1960’s, and 1970’s.

1953: Robert Moses Converts Coney Island to a Residential Area

On April 2, 1953, the New York Times reported that Parks Commissioner Robert Moses had put forward a proposal to the City Planning Commission to rezone Coney Island for residential use. Moses had both opposed the construction of new parks and demolished old ones to make way for the New York Aquarium and an ice skating rink. After the rezoning came into effect, Moses would go on to build a number of public housing projects, forever changing the character of Coney Island.

1963: CHPC’s Site Review of West 33rd & Mermaid

In this memo, CHPC provides an overview of two proposals for the construction and rehabilitation of housing projects in Coney Island: one financed by the Federal government, the other by the city of New York. Attached to the memo is a map indicating the proposed development sites.

1974: CHPC’s “Coney Island Report”

This document gives us a glimpse of the longer-term effects of the public housing developed in the 1960’s and 1970’s. CHPC published this report in response to a court order demanding the desegregation of Coney Island’s Mark Twain Junior High School. CHPC supports the principle of desegregation, but argues that implementing it will require a holistic approach. CHPC points out that creating mixed-income and middle class housing would not be enough to desegregate the schools; rather, the neighborhood as a whole needed to be made more attractive in order to bring in residents who could choose to live elsewhere.
Moses Asks Coney Island Rezoning To 'Upgrade' It as Residential Area

A public hearing held by the City Planning Commission at City Hall yesterday brought to light a plan devised by Park Commissioner Robert Moses for rezoning virtually all of Coney Island.

Although representatives of some of the seaside resort's amusement concessions and "rides" appeared in opposition to the proposal, Stuart Constable, Mr. Moses' aide and representative on the planning commission, explained that the rezoning project was "long-range." It was designed to "upgrade" Coney Island, he said.

Under the proposed rezoning, it is proposed to shift an area encompassing nearly all of the resort from its present unrestricted and business classification to a mixture of business, retail, local retail and residential designations. The change is expected to enable Coney Island to fit into the pattern envisioned for it as a largely residential seaside area.

Mr. Moses was described as believing that new housing projects springing up in the area were setting the pace for future Coney Island development, and that many of the lesser-patronized amusements there were "hanging by their teeth" economically.

Larger amusement arenas, such as Steeplechase Park, are expected to continue to thrive indefinitely at Coney, and the beach is expected to continue a summer mecca for millions seeking escape from the city heat. A rezoning such as that proposed by Mr. Moses would not immediately affect amusement activities already there.

But as amusements and rides disappear in their natural course, it was held, a rezoning would encourage their ultimate replacement by retail stores, playgrounds, lawns and other accessories to residential areas.

The commission reserved decision on the rezoning proposal.

With Commissioner Goodhue....Continued on Page 21, Column 2

REZONING SOUGHT FOR CONEY ISLAND

Continued From Page 1

Livingston Jr. dissenting, it approved plans for a new 262-car parking garage at the southwest corner of West Forty-fifth Street and the Avenue of the Americas. Mr. Livingston warned that such action would convert the Avenue of the Americas into "the Avenue of the Garages."

In a prepared dissenting opinion, Mr. Livingston assailed "these hit-or-miss, unbusinesslike, unscientific ways of doing things" that "may in the final analysis destroy this city as it will continue to encourage many businesses to seek greener pastures."

Mr. Livingston urged that the commission "formulate a garage policy following the one for inter-state buses laid down by the Board of Estimate a few years ago; namely, that in the future parking garages should be built only near the periphery of congested areas."

Governor Dewey's proposed transit authority, Mr. Livingston said, was likely not to be successful unless it was enlarged "into a regional one with wide powers under the Interstate Commerce Commission." A regional authority, he said, might derive revenue from the operation of motor vehicles and from rail and bus fares.

The commission approved a city map change eliminating West 116th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue to permit Columbia University to integrate its property abutting on both sides. The university will improve and landscape the former street area.
A resolution adopted by the City Planning Commission on May 28, 1953 was modified as follows by the Board of Estimate on June 22, 1953 and became effective on June 26, 1953.

Rearranged by the City Planning Commission that the resolution effective as of June 28, 1956 had been adopted. A resolution regulating and limiting the height and bulk of buildings hereinafter erected and occupying the land hereby designated as the "Zoning District," the said zoning district being a strip of land lying in the southwest corner of the City of New York, being the area beginning at the line between West End Avenue and West 100th Street, thence south along West 100th Street to the west line of the property described in the said resolution adopted on June 28, 1953, and thence west along the said west line to the north line of the property described in the said resolution of the Board of Estimate and the City Planning Commission in the year 1953 and thence north along the said north line to the point of commencement.

This resolution of the City Planning Commission is in all other respects hereby approved.
Site Review: West 33rd Street & Mermaid Avenue

Friday, April 12, 1963 -- 3:45 - 4:15 p.m.

Herbert J. Stark -- Sylvia W. Stark

The Housing Authority is proposing a federally-aided project of 635 dwelling units on an area bounded by West 31st Street to West 35th Street between Mermaid and Surf Avenue, excluding a large bowling alley at West 32nd and Surf Ave. Another 106 dus would be put in 5 buildings which are substantial apartment houses, all of which appear from the outside to be worth saving.

We also questioned whether several others, one on West 31st Street and Surf Avenue and a couple on West 35th Street, about the middle of the block, could not also be rehabilitated.

This area is characterized by bad buildings, mostly of frame construction and practically nothing worth saving. It also has dance halls and saloons and a hotel which impressed us as places probably catering to prostitution and drug addiction. The area seems to be predominantly Negro.

45% of the units are to be for the aging. In the area are JHS 239, which has some space available, and P.S. 188, overcrowded.

While the Housing Authority has not yet submitted it, they are planning a (Part IV) city-aided project for 244 dwelling units on the block between West 32nd and 33rd Streets from Mermaid to Neptune Avenues, right across the street from part of the federal proposal. This is a better area for higher rent housing as the surrounding blocks are more substantial and seem to be in much better condition.

Coney Island Houses with 534 dwelling units and average rents of $22.49 is adjacent to the federal part on the south towards the boardwalk and Gravesend Houses with 634 dwelling units and average rents of $12.80 is due north of the proposed no-cash-subsidy proposal. This would make sense as far as mingling low and middle income rentals. The question, however, is whether the city should go into the Part IV program where we recognize that rents will be above $30 a room.

This seems to be an excellent site for low rent housing.

At CHPC's Executive Committee meeting on April 15, Messrs. Davies and Tretter agreed that if the Authority went into Part IV here, they would be in competition with private industry.

Sylvia W. Stark

4/15/63
Introduction

Judge Jack S. Weinstein has ordered city, state and federal housing and planning officials to help desegregate Mark Twain Junior High School in Coney Island. Mark Twain, with a capacity of 1500 students, has 713 students, about 80% of whom are black and Spanish speaking.

Segregated schools are socially and morally unacceptable. In some cases they are also unavoidable, but they must be overcome where the opportunity exists. Judge Weinstein sees such an opportunity in Coney Island.

With this perception the Judge has imposed a common objective on the development activities in Coney Island. The Judge has told the involved agencies to adjust their individual needs, objectives and policies to the common goal of creating a racially and economically integrated community on Coney Island. This legal order and mission may have come too late. It also may well be in conflict with other objectives of city housing policy such as giving housing priority to low income families and/or displaced tenants in urban renewal areas. The questions and obstacles are real; but so, too, is the Judge's order and its importance.

The Setting

If an economically and racially integrated community is to be developed in New York City, Coney Island is an excellent place to try. The natural setting includes a broad sweep of the Atlantic Ocean, miles of open beach, and fresh air. The attractive apartments which have been opened in the Coney Island Neighborhood Development Plan area, i.e., the center of the Island, offer spectacular views.
Coney Island is buttressed by stable, predominantly white middle class neighborhoods, including Gravesend and Bensonhurst. The Coney Island NDP is anchored by Seagate on the west and East Coney Island, both of which are relatively stable. The population of Coney Island, running west from Stillwell Avenue to 37th Street (the Seagate boundary) is predominantly white, according to the 1970 Census. Some 8,160 families live here, of whom 58.6% are white, 22% are black and 17.8% are Spanish-speaking.

The aggreggate of development activity in the Coney Island NDP is new town scale, rivaling more publicized developments such as Battery Park City, Roosevelt Island, or even Coop City in its sweep and volume of planned or completed community facilities and housing. One of the benefits of Judge Weinstein's decision is that it encourages the perception that the Coney Island NDP isn't, or shouldn't be regarded as a collection of disparate housing projects.

To examine the constraints and opportunities of responding to the Judge's order, one may start with the housing that has already been built and occupied.

**Housing Authority**

Starting in 1954, but mainly over the past four years, the New York City Housing Authority has built a total of 3,202 units of low income family housing in the Coney Island NDP area. Close to half of the 713 students at Mark Twain come from these units. Children living in this public housing also attend the two elementary feeder schools for Mark Twain.

The children living in the Housing Authority's six Coney Island projects are predominantly black and Puerto Rican, although three of the projects have mainly white families. But the white families have far fewer children than the black and Puerto Rican families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Year Opened</th>
<th>Families</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>W B PR</td>
<td>W B PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mermaid</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>252 219 104</td>
<td>164 508 288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O'Dwyer</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>405 104 53</td>
<td>160 136 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carey</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>145 331 189</td>
<td>90 783 695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gravesend</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>296 226 102</td>
<td>202 530 219</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coney Island</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>341 133 44</td>
<td>281 224 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IB</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>42 77 68</td>
<td>29 218 221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Does not include projects for the elderly which are predominantly white.
The annual turnover in these units is resulting in lower white tenancy and still greater numbers of black and Puerto Rican children.

Aside from producing disproportionate numbers of minority school children, the Housing Authority's inventory is also contributing, due to recent relocation policies, some instability to the area. The "problem" project is Carey Gardens, 78 percent of whose tenants are on welfare.

The only other public housing for Coney Island consists of 501 units which are either in construction or ready for occupancy. Who will live in these units is a key issue. The Housing Authority has processed 480 applications from families of whom 64 are white, 241 are black and 175 are Puerto Rican.

Urban Development Corporation

The New York State Urban Development Corporation will soon surpass the Housing Authority as the major producer of housing in the Coney Island MPP area. So far, the UDC has completed 960 units of moderate cost 236 housing for families, and has another 2,098 units in construction or design.

The UDC has tried — through promotion, contracts with community organizations, billboard and newspaper advertising, and a readiness to sacrifice rental income — to achieve a tenant mix of 50 percent white, 25 percent black and 25 percent Puerto Rican. The income sacrifice came through holding the apartments off the market in the hope of attracting white families, an effort which so far has cost the housing companies $477,000 in lost rents.

These are the results in the three UDC family projects already occupied:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project*</th>
<th>Families</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sea Park East (Site 5-6)</td>
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<td>W:140 B:260 PR:155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea Park West (Site 7)</td>
<td>W:96 B:65 PR:39</td>
<td>W:33 B:154 PR:74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea Park North (Site 10)</td>
<td>W:18 B:52 PR:42</td>
<td>W:17 B:115 PR:93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Does not include UDC projects for the elderly

There are already 2,037 applicants for the additional UDC housing to be opened later this year and early 1975. Of this total 107 are white, 125 are Puerto Rican, and 1,805 are black.

Extraordinary measures are called for if the housing presently scheduled for Coney Island, or new units programmed as part of the response to Judge Heinstein, are to help desegregate local schools.
Attracting White or Middle Class Families: CHPC Recommendations

Despite its potential, Coney Island is presently unattractive to white and middle class families. In this section of the report we will outline the steps required if there is any hope at all of meeting the Judge's order.

School Desegregation

Judge Hangel's order has shifted public attention away from immediate efforts to desegregate Mark Twain, and we detect a tendency now to regard the entire situation as a housing problem. While housing is a critical element, the Judge's order should raise the level of planning and development for Coney Island to a simultaneous and massive effort to improve the area's housing, commercial, recreation, transportation and education facilities. School desegregation in Mark Twain and, to the maximum degree, in its feeder schools, must proceed concurrently rather than await a solution in these other areas.

Among the many options for desegregating Mark Twain, including temporarily closing it until the new housing produces an integrated student population and busing in children from other District schools, we favor making Mark Twain a magnet school, offering special programs and instruction for gifted children throughout District 21.

To avoid the upheaval which may well accompany a massive busing program and which would work against the interests of integration in the long haul, we would urge that integration efforts be focused on the entering grade at Mark Twain in the fall 1975 term and allow already enrolled junior high students in the District the opportunity to complete their education in their present schools.

Public Housing

There seems to be no chance at all of increasing the ratio of white/minority children either in the turnover of existing public housing or in the 501 units which are ready for occupancy or soon will be. The only real choice, and a hard one, is whether this housing will be made available to those families who will be displaced by additional renewal in the MHP (800 families) or the 480 families whose applications are already processed. There is some overlap because 20 on the Authority's list are to be displaced from the MHP, and another 100 are from immediately adjacent areas.

If the public housing is available only to displacedes, i.e., the 800, there is a strong possibility of creating another "problem" project, such as Carey Gardens. This would work strongly against the goals of residential integration. The reason is that 60 percent of the families to be relocated are on welfare. The Housing Authority should be given flexibility to choose tenants who will offer stability to the new housing, and to the neighborhood: and the choices should be made on that criterion from both lists, as well as the city-wide applicant pool.
UDC Moderate Cost Housing

The tenants who will live in the housing to be offered by UDC over the next 12 months will be a key determinant to the success or failure of integration. As it now stands, the families who have applied are primarily black and Spanish speaking. Once again, some difficult tenant selection decisions will have to be made, and, more important, section 236 income eligibility requirements will have to be waived. UDC has requested such a waiver from HUD, whose Secretary, UDC argues, has the ability to waive income requirements from the present $12,000 per year for a two bedroom apartment to approximately $14,700. Even this may not be enough, but it can help. Another necessary step must be a legislative change in the one quarter of annual income requirement as a fixed rule for 236 occupancy. This requirement, which is peculiar to the 236 program, rules out many families who simply will not devote that percentage of income to shelter.

UDC and other housing agencies must turn to federal subsidies to market housing that will attract the families envisioned in the Weinstein desegregation order. Inflation has rendered Mitchell-Lama city and state subsidies, which produce rents of $100-115 per room per month, obsolete as an inducement to middle class families. It has been argued, and the point is dramatized now in Coney Island, that the 236 program has become the only potential middle income subsidy. Rent charges of $50.00 per room per month are now common for 236 projects, and the UDC has discovered, as its tenant lists demonstrate, that white families at the currently required income limits are scarce. One cannot resist noting that a federal judge has ordered middle class integration in 236 housing which by federal definition is for moderate income families. As we see it, the federal income requirements for subsidized housing have contributed to the segregated housing problems in Coney Island. The federal responsibility to resolve this dilemma is further complicated by the federal impoundment of 236 subsidy money.

New Housing for Coney Island

Aside from the housing already in design and construction by UDC or the Housing Authority any new housing programmed for Coney Island must be built at a 70-30 middle class to low income ratio. And it is hard for us to see how this housing will be an inducement to middle class families with sufficient numbers of children to alter the school population unless it is built at maximum density and marketed en masse. The total maximum capacity of land available for development on which we feel should be made available, is 100 units to the acre (R-6 zoning). If some marginally used parcels between Surf Avenue and the Boardwalk are combined with remaining sites in the NDP, this means about 30 acres or 3,000 units of housing. If this housing is sufficiently subsidized, i.e., 236 financing, for middle class families with school children, it would offer some chance of further school desegregation. Development below this density would not have much of an impact on the school problem.
Creating a New Town Environment

Good housing at heavily subsidized prices and schools which suggest and deliver quality education are major elements in the planning strategy for Coney Island; but they are not enough. One may contemplate a prospective tenant's reaction driving past the junk yards on Cropsey Avenue to see what life may be like on Coney Island. Much of Mermaid Avenue is a disaster area, there is junk and debris along the side streets, Kaiser Park is in major disrepair, throughout the area sidewalks and streets are heaving and broken, shopping facilities are totally inadequate. While the new housing and community facilities such as the new PS 329 or the Stark Skating Rink offer glimmers of hope, it would take both imagination and a pioneering instinct to want to live there. Families with limited housing options are occupying the new housing. Judge Weinstein's order envisions a Coney Island with families who have other housing options choosing to live there. Creating an attractive Coney Island environment means improving, marketing, and promoting it as a totally new community. The major elements of such an approach include:

1) Developing a major shopping center to replace the unsatisfactory or non-existent facilities along Mermaid Avenue.
2) Clearing all blighting influences along Mermaid Avenue as well as other substandard or decaying buildings beyond already scheduled clearance areas.
3) Rehabilitating the Boardwalk west of the amusement area and clearing blighting influences between Surf Avenue and the Boardwalk through an expansion of the MDP. Some of this area should go to high rise housing.
4) Concentrating city repairs and services for park rehabilitation, sanitary facilities, street and sidewalk improvements, tree planting and landscaping.
5) Improving the convenience and adequacy of surface public transportation from the Stillwell Avenue subway terminal to the western end of the Island.

Administrative Recommendations

Judge Weinstein's order presents a formidable administrative challenge. In effect he is asking government planning and development agencies to produce and market a residential setting in Coney Island which is competitive to, albeit different from, suburban developments to which much of the city's middle class is moving. That will never happen if the involved agencies go their separate ways, which is what they have done in the past. Creating an attractive Coney Island means careful staging, financial commitment, and perhaps even sacrifice by each of the government agencies. None should be asked to step forward without the assurance that the others will do the same.

Perhaps the answer in an administrative and jurisdictional tangle as complicated as this one is a court appointed development administrator for Coney Island -- a continuation of the Master function as it has been played out so far in developing the plan. Another possibility is a specially appointed Development Corporation to carry out the plan, including budgetary commitments approved and ordered by Judge Weinstein. Whatever solution, Coney Island needs strong centralized development administration if its future is to be more promising than its past.
Federal Commitments

There is an Alice in Wonderland quality to the entire discussion of Coney Island because the federal subsidies required for the necessary urban renewal and housing construction are currently impounded in Washington. Perhaps Judge Weinstein's order can break the deadlock, just as perhaps the plan developed to respond to the Judge's order can dramatize the need to alter established federal policies concerning income limits in subsidized housing.

But beyond the specific issues and needs presented by this case, it seems to us that Judge Weinstein is raising fundamental questions, and challenges, about the capacity of government to deal with the urban problems of our time which Coney Island presents in microcosm. All the agencies the CHPC talked to agree with the Judge's objectives and want to cooperate. There surely is no lack of either competence or skill, and, as we stressed at the outset, Coney Island is as good a place as any to try. The question then remains, can the system perform?

Summary Recommendations

1) School desegregation in Coney Island cannot await or depend on integrated housing. The strategy to achieve an integrated, attractive community must involve concurrent steps in housing, recreation, commercial development, and improved education.

2) Desegregation at Mark Twain should involve minimum disruption of junior high school age children throughout the district. The immediate aim should be to integrate the entering grade in the Fall, 1975 term and the integration should be developed around the creation of a magnet school with specialized instruction at Mark Twain for children throughout District 21.

3) The Housing Authority should be given discretion in tenant selection for the 501 units of public housing coming on the line. The priority for selection from among those already on application, those to be displaced from the NDP, and the city-wide applicant pool should be to those families who will enhance the stability of the new projects.

4) The key "make or break" element in the integration strategy is the issue of who will occupy the 2,098 units of UDC housing in design or construction in Coney Island. Not only must income limits for the 236 housing be waived up to the maximum permitted under the HUD Secretary's discretion, but Judge Weinstein and the legal master should consider what efforts are needed to change the basic law as it relates both to maximum income and percentage of income for 236 apartment rents.

5) The NDP area should be expanded to include areas between Surf Avenue and the Boardwalk, and some of these additional sites should be developed at maximum density for housing. Throughout the NDP all available sites should be considered for maximum density, heavily subsidized high rise housing to be marketed en masse with priority to middle class families with school age children.
6) Immediate efforts are needed to create a major shopping center along Mermaid Avenue, and all blighting influences throughout the area cleared.

7) There must be a saturation of park rehabilitation, street and sidewalk repair, transportation, and other municipal services in the Coney Island area.

8) Carrying out the Coney Island development must be a highly centralized operation through a specially created development corporation with budgetary commitments approved and ordered by Judge Weinstei

CONEY ISLAND COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

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