



The New York Times/Susan O'Connor

Richard Eagan helping renovate the Dragon's Cave in Coney Island, which will reopen as the Spookhouse.

Activity and Hope Rising at Coney I.

Sporting a silk top hat, Dick Zigun strode onto the Coney Island boardwalk yesterday and invited passers-by to step right up to Sideshowes by the Seashore, a new theater that blends art and amusement with a healthy dose of nostalgia.

Around the corner at the Spookhouse, a renovated amusement ride, a group of artists painted skeletons and shooting stars onto cars that snake along a tortuous track.

As the season began in earnest this weekend at "the world's playground," these activities provided a contrast to Coney Island's gutted bath houses and boarded-up booths. With the opening of Sideshowes yesterday, live entertainment returned to the boardwalk for the first time in recent memory.

And when the cars begin to roll at the Spookhouse, visitors will be treated to the first fully renovated version of a Coney Island attraction of the 1950's.

In addition, the boardwalk was abuzz with talk that a group of developers with plans to build a new amusement park has bid to lease the old Steeplechase grounds, now a city-owned playing field.

Decline and Renewal

"Coney Island is on the way up," said Kenneth Handwerker, vice president of Nathan's, whose grandparents began selling hot dogs on the boardwalk almost 70 years ago. "It had a decline in the 1960's, but slowly but surely, both the amusement and residential areas are coming back."

Since 1964, when the last thrill seekers descended on wobbly legs from the Parachute Jump, the news from Coney Island has been almost unrelentingly gloomy, dominated by tales of arson and abandonment.

Coney Island began its decline that year, when Steeplechase Park, then a major amusement park, was sold. Various developments, including an apartment complex and a seaside park, were planned for the 12.5-acre waterfront plot, but none were built.

And with the major attraction gone from the west end of the boardwalk, the amusement area — a neon-bathed enclave of glitter and gaudiness — began to shrink.

A series of fires and fears of neighborhood violence further darkened

Coney Island's image. On a sticky summer weekend, though, the area still draws more than a million visitors.

In the early 1980's, a handful of artists converged on Coney Island, determined to restore to the area the power of fantasy that it once exerted. While they acknowledge that their ventures are small in comparison to the forces of decay, they see themselves as a force of revitalization.

"We became instant Coney Island old-timers," said Mr. Zigun, who is artistic director of Coney Island U.S.A., a nonprofit group dedicated to reviving Coney Island traditions.

Yesterday Coney Island U.S.A. marked the opening of Sideshowes by the Seashore with six hours of music and plays. The theater is housed in a former pinball arcade.

Trying to Fit In

Mr. Zigun, a playwright who came to Coney Island in search of an affordable loft, views working in Coney Island today as a challenge both entrepreneurial and artistic.

"We're going to try to fit into the way Coney Island works," he said. "Before a performance, maybe someone will go out on the boardwalk and do a spiel."

Fitting into "the way Coney Island works" has traditionally meant capturing the imagination of the crowd for a brief, mesmerizing performance. It has also meant charging admission at every opportunity.

"Nobody is going to get in the door without paying," said Mr. Zigun. Ninety-nine cents buys admission to an exhibit of contemporary art as well as a collection of Coney Island memorabilia.

It was the "war-torn playground" look of Coney Island that attracted Philomena Morana to the area and prompted her, together with Richard Eagan, to form the Coney Island Hysterical Society. "We became hysterical over the fact that less and less of Coney Island was intact," Miss Morana, an artist and graphic designer, said.

With assistance from Nathan's, the group is renovating the Dragon's Cave, which it plans to unveil on Memorial Day as the Spookhouse, "Coney Island's only ride-through gallery in the dark." The group has commissioned New York artists to

paint the cars and create new illusions.

"We're de-emphasizing the gore," said Miss Morana, pointing to a remnant of the old ride, a crumbling papier-mâché elephant mashing a dummy's head. "We're encouraging people to do something bizarre, something interesting."

According to Mr. Handwerker of Nathan's, the artists in Coney Island are trying to revive a force that has lain dormant but never died. "The spirit has always been there," he said. "You just had to have some visionaries see this."

It does seem to require a visionary to discern the old spirit of Coney Island among the many burned-out rides and vacant lots. Where at one time there were three major amusement parks on Coney Island, today only one, Astroland, remains.

And many of the old-time Coney Island operators voice skepticism that the decline of the area can be reversed.

"It gets worse every year," said one game-booth operator.

'Bit of Imagination'

Horace Bullard, the owner of Kansas Fried Chicken restaurants, who heads the group of developers that has bid to lease the Steeplechase grounds, said that "with a little bit of imagination you can see something happening there, something blossoming."

Though the city has accepted the bid of Mr. Bullard's group, Coney Island Resorts, negotiations on the site have not been concluded.

Despite its present condition and uncertain prospects, Coney Island still works some of its old magic when the tinny music of the carousel wafts over the boardwalk. And with an ocean breeze blowing off the Atlantic, Coney Island remains a logical spot to escape the heat of the city.

Paul Georgoklakos, who has observed Coney Island since 1950 from his boardwalk refreshment stand, sees the history of the area as cyclical and its future as one of renewal.

"I know we've got the most beautiful beach and boardwalk maybe in the world," said Mr. Georgoklakos with an expansive gesture that took in the sea, the pier and the flying gulls. "I can't see why we can't make it what it used to be."