

March 23, 2010

STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE N.Y.C. LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION REGARDING THE PROPOSED DESIGNATION OF THE CONEY ISLAND THEATRE (LATER SHORE THEATER) BUILDING AT 1301 SURF AVENUE AND THE CHILDS RESTAURANT BUILDING AT 1208 SURF AVENUE, BROOKLYN AS INDIVIDUAL LANDMARKS

Good afternoon Chair Tierney and Commissioners. I am Andrea Goldwyn, speaking on behalf of the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

The Conservancy is pleased to be working with a coalition of preservationists, planners, historians, and Coney Island business owners to support designation of the Shore Theater and Childs Restaurant as landmarks. These buildings merit individual designation as intact representatives of the century-old history of America's great playground, Coney Island, and we thank the Commission for its speed in hearing them.

This action, however, should be only a first step. Coney Island is characterized by long blocks of low-rise buildings offering leisure and cultural activities, punctuated by the whimsical shapes of amusement rides. The two buildings being heard today are also part of a proposed historic district of about 10 mostly two-and three- story structures along Surf Avenue that, if designated, would ensure that Coney's rich history continues to be available to today's residents and visitors, even as new rides take the place of long-lost adventures.

The center of Coney Island today is the intersection of Surf Avenue and Stillwell Avenue, where the entrance to the subway leads out to two landmarks: the Shore Theater and a building not on the calendar today, Nathan's Famous. The Shore was built in 1925 by the theater architects Reilly & Hall, and was originally known as the Loew's Coney Island. This Italian Renaissance-inspired structure is largely intact on the exterior, and while the interior is not accessible to the public, we understand that many interior features, including the dome with its elaborate plasterwork details and multi-color finishes, remain. The Theatre is also notable as being part of a 1920s redevelopment plan geared toward making Coney a year-round attraction; once again it is ready to play an important role in the revival of Coney Island.

The other building at the intersection of Surf and Stillwell is perhaps the heart of Coney Island: Nathan's Famous, but it is not part of today's agenda. The restaurant, which might be Coney's most well-known attraction launched both a national chain and the popularity of fast food across the country, and has been at this location since 1916. It retains much the same appearance as it has had for over 50 years, including the classic "Nathan's" signage.

Childs Restaurant on Surf Avenue, a block away from the Shore Theatre is also worthy of designation. This Spanish Colonial-Revival style building has been a centerpiece of activity at Coney for over 90 years. The colorful decorative elements, including mosaic details at the ground floor arched openings and a bracketed tiled cornice are largely intact, even after many owners, uses, and unsympathetic treatments. Today, as home to Coney Island USA, it is a link to Coney's past and its future.

Designation of these buildings and of a district would help ensure preservation of Coney's history, and of the low-rise character of Surf Avenue. They could provide a graceful transition to the amusement area and beach if planned high-rise towers are moved to the north side of Surf Avenue. These structures possess the "special character" that is part of the heritage of New York City, necessary for landmark designation. They remind us of the years in the first half of the 20th century when Coney Island was part of the pulse of New York, providing a much-needed recreational destination to all socio-economic levels of the City's growing population.

While Coney Island is certainly a treasure for all New Yorkers, many people beyond New York City have memories of visiting Coney Island, or have heard stories about it from friends and families. And many of those include memories of enjoying a Nathan's hot dog. Designation of these two buildings and quick calendaring of those not heard today will help ensure that future generations have the same opportunity to experience Coney Island. Thank you for the opportunity to present the Conservancy's views.