Preserving the Honky-Tonk: Coney Island’s Future in Its Amusement Past
Melissa Baldock (M.S., Historic Preservation, 2003)

Written in 2003, before the City of New York created the Coney Island Development Corporation and initiated a rezoning of Coney Island’s amusement area, this thesis explores how traditional and non-traditional preservation planning tools can help preserve Coney Island’s essential character and spirit. The examination focuses on how a future revitalization of the area can still preserve Coney Island’s “honky-tonk” so that it remains an area of affordable amusements.

The thesis first describes the history of Coney Island’s “glory days” – from the time of the first European settlement until the end of World War II. Next it addresses the post-war history of Coney Island, as it is this history that shaped the 2003 conditions and public perceptions of the area. Through an analysis of the physical surroundings, demographics, landownership, politics, and potential development plans, the thesis then outlines Coney Island’s potential opportunities and weaknesses.

The second half of the thesis looks more theoretically at the meaning of Coney Island in American culture. It investigates the definition of the term “honky-tonk” in order to understand why it is important to the essence of Coney Island and why it should be preserved. Coney Island is then analyzed as a cultural landscape, with the beach and its mechanical amusements as its defining entities. Preserving the Honky-Tonk also explores the positive and negative aspects of nostalgia, as well as the representations of Coney Island in movies, photographs, documentaries, and writings. The thesis then compares Coney Island to other American landscapes of recreation, like Disneyland, Times Square, and Las Vegas, so as to better understand what Coney Island can mean to Americans as a cultural landscape in the future. Finally the thesis concludes with both short-term and long-term recommendations for Coney Island’s future.

Preserving the Honky-Tonk can be downloaded at:
http://www.baldock.com/Coney_Island_Thesis.htm

Thesis Advisor: Anthony C. Wood
Readers: Carol Clark
Steve Zeitlin