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NEW YORK CITY BEACHES: CONEY ISLAND & ROCKAWAY AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

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Steeplechase Park

West Brighton, Coney Island | 1897 – 1964

In 1875 Andrew Culver, a railroad financier, completed the Prospect Park and Coney Island Railroad, linking south Prospect Park and Bay Ridge to West Brighton and Norton's Point on what became the known as the Culver Line.

As the first rail link to reach West Brighton, Culver's investment catalyzed the area's rapid urbanization from a relatively quiet central shoreline into an iconic destination for mass entertainment. Notable subsequent developments in West Brighton included the Iron Tower, a 300 foot tall observation platform, served by two steam elevators, that Culver purchased from the 1876 centennial exhibition in Philadelphia and reassembled on Surf Avenue; the Iron Pier and the New Iron Pier—built in 1879 by the Sea Beach Railroad and by Culver in 1881, respectively, to provide elaborate entertainment facilities and access to steamship transport; LaMarcus Thompson's Switchback Railway, created in 1884 as the first, primitive roller coaster; and the Elephantine Colossus, a massive, 150 foot tall wood building in the shape of an elephant, which opened in 1885 as a hotel and later devolved into a brothel. Built two years before the Statue of Liberty, some claimed that the Colossus was the first man-made structure visible to immigrants entering New York Harbor.

As thousands of visitors flocked to West Brighton's increasingly colorful amusements, Paul Boyton, an aquatics stuntman, was the first to recognize the value of a consolidated amusement park. At the time, entertainment vendors typically operated individual concessions where visitors could choose venues and pay on a per-ride basis. In 1895 Boyton created Sea Lion Park, the first enclosed amusement park to charge a general admission fee. George Tilyou, who had lived most of his life on Coney Island and already operated several attractions in the area, immediately recognized the benefits of Boyton's innovation. In 1897 he opened Steeplechase Park as a discrete, unified enterprise. A gifted entrepreneur, Tilyou intuited that he could profit from simple, low maintenance attractions featuring slap-stick, family-oriented rides. Chief among them was his Steeplechase, a series of gravity-driven mechanical horses traversing a circular track within the park, which owing to its enclosure, could now be fully designed and controlled. Steeplechase was immediately successful,

recouping its initial investment after only three weeks and inspiring the creation of Luna Park in 1903 and Dreamland in 1904 (Tilyou also opened Steeplechase concessions and baths at Rockaway Beach).

After Steeplechase was ravaged by a fire in 1907, Tilyou responded by charging 10 cents for admission to see the ruins, promptly rebuilt the park, and enclosed it under an enormous shed which ensured that its attractions could operate in inclement weather.

John Kasson describes Steeplechase Park and its effect on early 20th century cultural norms in *Amusing the Million*¹, a history of Coney Island, noting:

“Instead of games of competitive skill, which demanded self-control, Steeplechase emphasized games of theatricality and of vertigo, which encouraged participants to shed self-consciousness and surrender to a spirit of reckless, exuberant play...a major attraction of Steeplechase was simply the sanctioned opportunity to witness the wholesale violation of dominant social proprieties. Momentary disorientation, intimate exposure, physical contact with strangers, pratfalls, public humiliation—conditions that in other circumstances might have been excruciating became richly entertaining. The laughter of participants and spectators testified to their sense of release.”

Luna Park & Dreamland

West Brighton, Coney Island | 1903 – 1944; 1904 – 1911²

West Brighton’s growth as a destination for mass entertainment benefited from both the “half-holiday” movement of the mid-1880s that provided leisure time to America’s industrial labor force, and from the mechanical and technological developments that permitted the construction of new, innovative machines for amusement. This transition “gave currency to forms of recreation that were less structured and less regulated. It expressed itself in less restrained forms of ocean bathing, in a more casual mingling of the sexes, and in the sensory thrills provided by the mechanical rides. This newly minted code of leisure prioritized and glorified motion and movement of the human body. It was available to practically everyone, regardless of gender or race, and was inherently democratic.”³

Having partnered with George Tilyou to create rides at Steeplechase, Fred Thompson was well-positioned to capitalize on the tens of thousands of visitors pouring into West Brighton seeking novel thrills. Thompson had trained as an architect and proved shrewd as an amusement park designer. Working with Skip Dundy, whose business acumen was essential to their success, Thompson opened Luna Park in 1903, adjacent to Steeplechase on the site formerly occupied by Sea Lion Park. Unlike Tilyou, Thompson aimed to astonish visitors: spanning over 20 acres, the park’s design eschewed standard classical forms and embraced garish, programmatically integrated structures organized around a central lagoon with an eponymous “Trip to the Moon,” ride and over 250,000 electric lights for nighttime

¹ Kasson, John F. *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 59-61.

² Opening and closing dates of Luna Park and Dreamland, respectively.

³ Kasson, John F. *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 41.

illumination. Thomson noted: "I have built Luna Park on a definite architectural plan...I have eliminated all classical conventional forms from its structure and taken a sort of free renaissance and Oriental type for my model, using spires and minarets wherever I could...It is marvelous what you can do in the way of arousing human emotions by the use you can make architecturally, of simple lines. Luna Park is built on that theory, and the result has proven that theory's work."⁴ 45,000 visitors attended opening night at the Park, which by 1907 claimed to have admitted over 60 million individuals.

Just as Thompson seized on the success of Steeplechase, William H. Reynolds opened Dreamland in 1904 on the beachfront across Surf Avenue from Luna Park, and in direct competition with it. Reynolds, who was a successful real estate developer and former state senator, spared no expense to compete with his rivals. The park's design mimicked and amplified elements of Luna Park, from its central tower and aquatic attractions, to its use of over a million electric lights. Hailed for contributing to the "new" sanitized Coney Island, Dreamland, like Luna Park and West Brighton as whole, nevertheless trafficked in the exploitation of socially marginalized individuals, exoticized cultural stereotypes, animal cruelty, and the cathartic draw of ritualized disaster.

In *Delirious New York*⁵, Rem Koolhaas explores the technological, social and formal implications of Coney Island's development:

The triad of personalities and professions that Tilyou, Thompson and Reynolds represent — amusement expert/professional architect/developer-politician — is reflected in the character of the three parks:

Steeplechase, where the park format is invented almost by accident under the pressure of a hysterical demand for entertainment; Luna, where this format is invested with thematic and architectural coherence; and finally Dreamland, where the preceding breakthroughs are elevated to an ideological plane by a professional politician...

Reynolds lifts many of Dreamland's components from the typology of pleasure established by its predecessors but arranges them in a single programmatic composition in which the presence of each attraction is indispensable to the impact of the others.

Dreamland is located on the sea. Instead of the shapeless pond or would-be lagoon that is the center of Luna, Dreamland is planned around an actual inlet of the Atlantic, a genuine reservoir of the Oceanic with its well-tested catalytic potential to trigger fantasies. Where Luna insists on its otherworldliness by claiming an outrageous alien location, Dreamland relies on a more subliminal and plausible dissociation: its entrance porches are underneath gigantic plaster-of-paris ships under full sail, so that metaphorically the surface of the entire park is "underwater," an Atlantis found before it has ever been lost.

⁴ Koolhaas, Rem. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994), 39.

⁵ Koolhaas, Rem. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994), 45-46.