

Landmarks Preservation Commission
May 23, 1989; Designation List 215
LP-1708

THE WONDER WHEEL, 3059 West 12th Street, located on the block bounded by the Riegelmann Boardwalk, West 12th Street, Bowery Street, and Jones Walk, Borough of Brooklyn. Invented by Charles Herman. Manufactured and built by the Eccentric Ferris Wheel Amusement Company, 1918-20.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 8696, Lot 145; that portion of Block 8696, Lot 140 consisting of the parcel of land over which the Wonder Wheel projects, for which there is an easement; the equivalent portion of Jones Walk over which the Wonder Wheel projects; and the portion of the sidewalk of West 12th Street over which the Wonder Wheel neon sign projects.

On September 15, 1987, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of The Wonder Wheel and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 13). Five witnesses, including the owner of the Wonder Wheel, spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. On August 23, 1988, a second public hearing was held on a revised proposed Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The owner requested that the hearing be continued until the following Spring. On May 16, 1989, a third public hearing was conducted to correct the proposed Landmark Site (Item No. 5). Four witnesses, including the owner, spoke in favor of designation. The owner of Block 8696, Lot 140, which is subject to an easement to the owner of the lot with the Wonder Wheel, took no position but had questions about the impact of designation. All hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. The Commission has received several letters in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Wonder Wheel, which incorporates twenty-four passenger cars of which sixteen slide along serpentine tracks, was invented by Charles Herman of New York as an improvement upon that paragon of pleasure wheels, G.W.G. Ferris's giant wheel erected for the famous Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Manufactured by the Eccentric Ferris Wheel Amusement Company for Herman J. Garms, Sr., the Wonder Wheel opened on Memorial Day, 1920, at Coney Island, which had reached its zenith as America's amusement park capital. Offering panoramic views of Brooklyn, the wheel, in turn, is an important feature of that borough's skyline. The Wonder Wheel has been included in films and television commercials. It has maintained an exemplary safety record throughout its sixty-nine years of uninterrupted operation, carrying approximately thirty million pleasure seekers. The Wheel has

come, along with the Parachute Jump, to symbolize Coney Island.

The History of Coney Island¹

Coney Island has played a part in the history of New York since the first days of European exploration, when Henry Hudson docked his ship, the Half Moon, off its coast in 1609. Lady Deborah Moody and forty followers settled Gravesend, the area north of Coney Island, in 1643; she bought the island itself from the Canarsie Indians in 1654. Not until 1824 did the Gravesend and Coney Island Road and Bridge Company build a shell road from the thriving center of Gravesend to what is now West 8th Street on the island. Along with the commencement of steamer ship service from New York in 1847, this improved access allowed about a half dozen small hotels to spring up by the 1860s. During this period many famous Americans rusticated there: Washington Irving, Herman Melville, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and Walt Whitman.

But the nature of vacationing at Coney Island changed quickly during the 1870s, when several railroad companies began service from Brooklyn; the completion of F.L. Olmsted's Ocean Parkway, a designated New York City Scenic Landmark, also provided a comfortable route for carriages. Grand hotels and restaurants accommodated the mostly well-to-do visitors, who came to enjoy not only the ocean and cool sea breezes but also the amusements which were transforming Coney into the most famous family park among its American counterparts. A festive atmosphere was ensured by the transferral to Coney Island of structures from the dismantled Centennial Exposition which had been held in Philadelphia in 1876.

Coney Island developed into "America's first and probably still most symbolic commitment to mechanized leisure."² The island increasingly became the site for technologically advanced structures such as the balloon hangar, elephant-shaped hotel and observatory (built in 1882, it became an unofficial symbol of American amusement parks), and the Iron Pier (1878) which housed many amusements. Mechanically-driven rides were pioneered at Coney, one example being LaMarcus A. Thompson's Switchback Railway (1884), a precursor of the roller coaster. Most of these rides succeeded because they combined socially acceptable thrills with undertones of sexual intimacy.³ Indeed, Coney Island, which earned the sobriquet "Sodom by the Sea," was "the only place in the United States that Sigmund Freud said interested him."⁴ As early as 1883, Coney's name was identified with entertainment, proven by the renaming of a midwestern park as "Ohio Grove, The Coney Island of the West."⁵

Between 1880 and 1910 its three large and successful race-tracks gave Coney Island the reputation of horseracing capital of the country. In addition to gamblers, such features attracted confidence men, roughnecks, and prostitutes. Coney's many activ-

ities could be viewed from above in the three-hundred-foot Iron Tower (originally the Sawyer Tower at the 1876 Exposition). This most notorious phase of Coney's history ended around the turn of the century after many hotels burned down in fires during the 1890s and racetrack betting was outlawed by the state in 1910.

A movement led by George C. Tilyou to transform Coney's corrupt image introduced the idea of the enclosed amusement park to American recreation. By 1894 there were dozens of separately owned rides; but the following year Capt. Paul Boyton opened Sea Lion Park, a group of rides and attractions one enjoyed after paying an admission fee at the gate. During the next decade, Coney's three most famous enclosed parks opened: Steeplechase Park (Tilyou's own endeavor), Luna Park, and Dreamland, forming "the largest and most glittering amusement area in the world."⁶ Throughout Coney Island and intermingled with rides (such as the Barrel of Love and the Hoop-la) and food vendors, were other typical carnival features such as freak shows, guess-your-weight stands, and games. This scene was enlivened by barkers calling out to potential spectators, elaborate pavilions of eclectic design, and thousands of incandescent light bulbs. The size of the crowd on a typical Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1900 was about 100,000.

Another transformation occurred at Coney Island around 1920, with the influx of lower-income visitors, who arrived on the newly-completed subway lines for a mere nickel. Many elegant eating places had suffered with the beginning of Prohibition; the democratization of Coney facilitated their replacement by stands offering cheaper fare. The best known example is Nathan's Famous which, in 1916, began selling hot dogs for a nickel. Visitors were entertained at Tilyou's theater by Irving Berlin, Mae West, and John Philip Sousa.⁷ By 1925, an average Sunday afternoon attendance had soared to one million.

In spite of the nighttime blackout imposed on Coney's lights during World War II, the amusement parks flourished, due to entertainment-seeking servicemen on leave and to the rationing of gasoline. But Coney's heyday came to an end after the war. Although the island survived attempts by Parks Commissioner Robert Moses to obliterate the animated jumble of buildings, rides, and attractions, it did not fare as well with fire damage and the growing mobility provided by the automobile. The New York City Housing Authority sought to revitalize the area by replacing small, summer cottages with high-rise residential towers, a plan which only further undermined the neighborhood's character. Today many of Coney Island's landmarks have disappeared, due to neglect, fire, or poor planning; however, enough still stands to remind us of Coney Island's importance as New York's playground and as the prototype for amusement parks throughout the country, from Playland in Rye, New York, to Abbott Kinney's amusement piers in Venice, California.⁸

The History of Pleasure Wheels

The modern pleasure or Ferris wheel developed from European and Oriental prototypes,⁹ which consisted of two uprights supporting a horizontal cylinder rotated by hand. Developed several centuries ago at fairs and festivals, these swinglike devices were eventually enhanced by decorated mechanical organs and came to be known in England as "perpendicular roundabouts." In 1867 I.N. Forrester of Bridgeport, Connecticut, received an American patent for his version of two-wheel swings set closely together and rotated by a gear drive. By the 1880s the Conderman Brothers of Clay City, Indiana, had produced a thirty-five-foot portable wheel of metal tubing which was rotated by gasoline-engine power through a wire cable.

The next breakthrough in pleasure wheel design resulted from the need to create for the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition (1893) a monument to rival the Eiffel Tower of the Paris World's Fair (1889).¹⁰ George Washington Gale Ferris (1859-96), a civil engineer and head of the Pittsburgh Bridge Company, designed a wheel to surpass its predecessors; Ferris's wheel was 264 feet high, had a suspension system resembling a bicycle wheel, and detailing which accommodated the expansion and contraction of the metal components. Carrying two million people during the fair, the visibility, popularity, and financial success of the first "Ferris Wheel" insured many imitations, including the first at Coney Island, erected for George C. Tilyou in 1894.¹¹ Although significantly smaller than that in Chicago, this predecessor of the Wonder Wheel was billed as "The World's Largest."

The Wonder Wheel

Of the many variants of the Ferris wheel, the design of Coney Island's Wonder Wheel stands out as unusual.¹² It was invented by Charles Herman of New York and manufactured in 1918-20 by the Eccentric Ferris Wheel Amusement Company from steel produced at the blast furnaces of Bethlehem Steel. The wheel was paid for by Herman J. Garms, Sr. Having opened on Memorial Day, May 30, 1920, the Wonder Wheel still stands on the same site at 3059 West 12th Street. In scale, it continues the grand tradition of the original Ferris Wheel of 1893. The Wonder Wheel's total height is 150 feet, the equivalent of a fifteen-story building. It weighs 200 tons, and is operated by a forty-horsepower motor. Its eight stationary and sixteen pivoting cars are an improvement upon Ferris's more rudimentary design: each swinging car follows a curved track which leads it alternately towards the hub and towards the circumference as the wheel turns. The total capacity is 160 passengers.

Description

A steel-framed enclosure sheathed in painted plywood and corrugated metal leads to the steel wheel structure. The two A-shaped leg structures (painted blue) are framed like trusses; they support an axle covered by the orange words "Wonder Wheel," which are lighted by neon tubes at night. From this hub radiate sixteen spokes, connected at their outer points by a sixteen-sided perimeter (all painted orange on their outer surfaces, green on the inner ones.) These are braced by minor elements (painted green on both sides.) All members are connected by gusset plates and rivets. Each passenger car has metal panels on the bottom half and wire mesh on the top, with doors on both sides and two wood benches within. The eight fixed cars on the circumference (painted white) are supplemented by sixteen cars (painted alternatively red-and-yellow and blue-and-yellow) which move on serpentine tracks. Over the years, normal maintenance has not significantly altered the original appearance of the wheel structure.

Standing at the West 12th Street gate to the Wonder Wheel is an elaborate neon sign.¹³ This 700-pound metal fixture extends 7'-6" over the sidewalk and is supported by a steel frame with three columns, horizontal bars, and cross-bracing. Raised ten feet above grade, the main section of the neon sign is a seven-foot-diameter stylized wheel with multicolored spokes and twelve pleasure wheel cars, bracketed on the top and bottom by two-foot-high rectangular panels spelling out "WONDER WHEEL." Running along the top of the frame is a series of arrows pointing to the ride.

Another sign, located above an underpass which leads to the wheel from the south, has illuminated and painted components. Painted on the south elevation of the building faced in masonry blocks is a clown and arrows pointing to the underpass. Surmounting this is a metal sign with orange letters spelling out "WONDER WHEEL" which is illuminated with incandescent bulbs.

Recent History¹⁴

In 1983 Garms's son, Fred, sold the Wonder Wheel to Deno Vourderis, then an enterprising restaurateur who had "fallen in love" with Coney soon after emigrating from Greece in 1939. Working first as a hot dog vendor and appliance repairman, Vourderis's dream was to own the Wonder Wheel; now he also is its chief mechanic. Since 1983 all twenty-four cars have been completely rebuilt and repainted. The Wheel structure has been sandblasted and repainted. One of the cars is reserved for dogs specially trained to alert the wheel's operator to irregular sounds in the motor. In its sixty-nine years of operation, the Wonder Wheel has never had an accident, although roughly thirty million passengers have enjoyed the ride, 14,506 on a record-

setting day, July 4, 1947. Turning seven days a week from April through September, it is a unique and imposing feature of the landscape. One of the oldest rides still in operation at Coney Island, the Wonder Wheel has been a cherished symbol of that community for many years. Its associations with Coney Island's history and unmarred condition have won the wheel a place in films (including "Remo Williams: the Adventure Begins") and television commercials (including one for the Goodyear Company.) The Wonder Wheel's fame has spread worldwide, even inspiring a counterpart at Dreamland Amusement Park in Yokahama, Japan.

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NOTES

1. See Eugene L. Armbruster, Coney Island (New York, 1924), 5-12; Edo McCullough, Good Old Coney Island (New York, 1957), 17-25, 155 passim; Gary Kyriazi, The Great American Amusement Parks: A Pictorial History (Secaucus, N. J., 1976), 17-98, 118; Richard Peck, "In Gravesend, The Past Bends To a New Day Slowly, Slowly," New York Times, Sept. 16, 1973, sec 8, pp. 1, 14; International Herald Tribune June 20-21, 1987, p. 16; Frederick and Mary Fried, "Amusement Parks and Fairs," Built in the U.S.A., ed. Diane Maddex (Washington, D. C., 1985), 12-13; Burton Lindheim, "Coney Has A War Boom," NYT, June 27, 1943, sec. 2, p. 11.
2. Robert E. Snow & David E. Wright, "Coney Island: A Case Study in Popular Culture and Technical Change," Journal of Popular Culture, 11 (Spring 1976), 960.
3. Snow, 966.
4. International Herald Tribune, June 20-21, 1987, p. 16.
5. See William F. Mangels, The Outdoor Amusement Industry (New York, 1952), 19.
6. Fried, 13.
7. Mrs. Lena Goldberg, in a conversation, July 12, 1988.
8. Kyriazi (1976), 118.
9. Mangels, 105-07.
10. Mangels, 107-09; "Ferris, George Washington Gale," Dictionary of American Biography, vol. 6, 339-40; Al Griffin, Step Right Up, Folks! (Chicago, [1974]), 49-50.
11. Peter Lyon, "The Master Showman of Coney Island," American Heritage, 9 (June 1958), 19.
12. See Mangels, 110-11; Bay News, Aug. 19, 1985, pp. 3, 11.
13. New York City, Department of Buildings, Brooklyn. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 7286, Lot 166. ES 823-1949. The sign and its framework were erected under the supervision of architect Joseph S. Spieshandler soon after plans were approved by the Department of Buildings in August, 1950.
14. Bay News, Aug. 19, 1985, Aug. 17, 1987; Deno's Wonder Wheel Park, "Brief History of the Wonder Wheel," Memo to LPC, Mar. 19, 1987.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

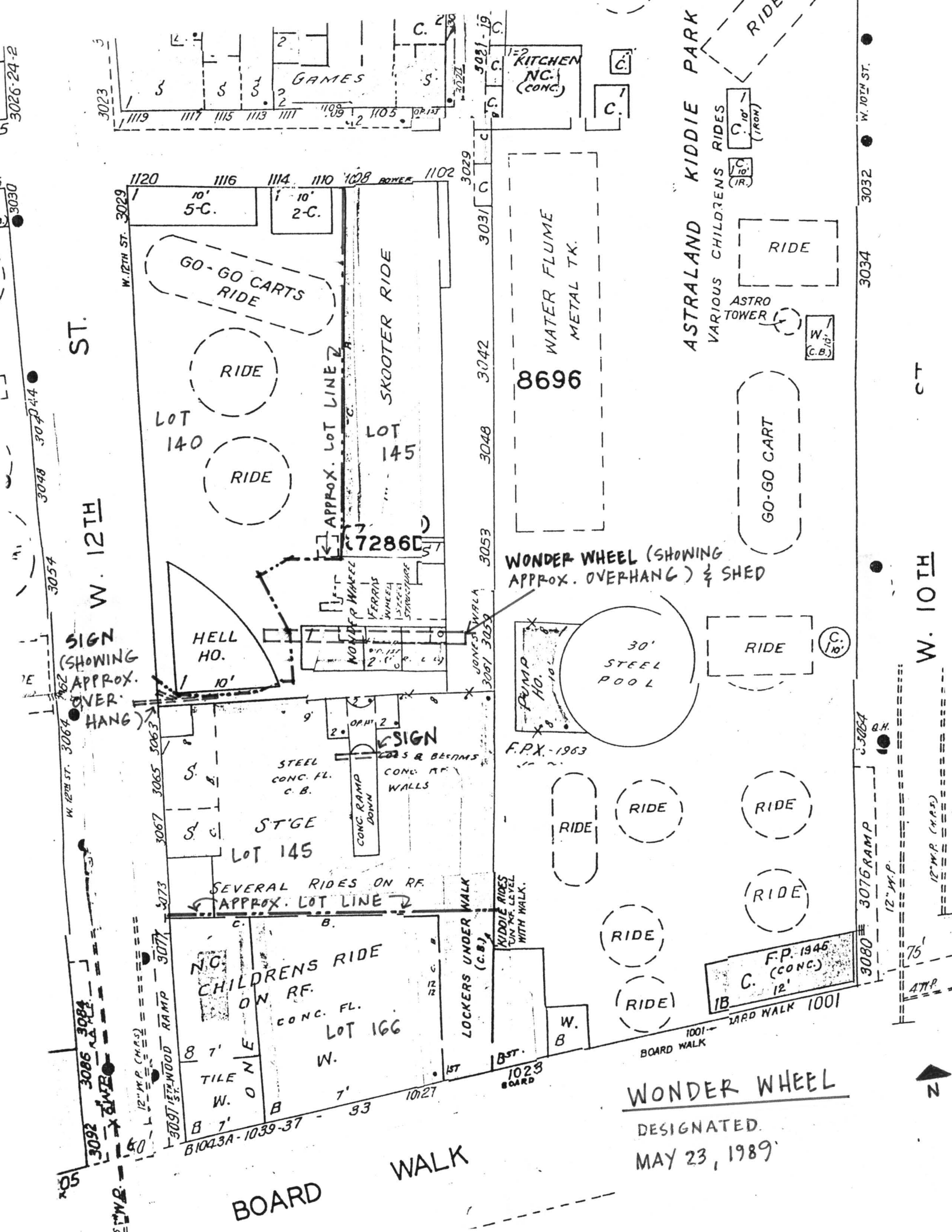
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this structure, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Wonder Wheel has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Wonder Wheel, invented by Charles Herman of New York, was manufactured and built in 1918-20 as a unique variant of the famous Ferris Wheel of the Columbian Exposition of 1893; that it affords panoramic views of Brooklyn and itself is an important feature of that borough's skyline; that the Wonder Wheel has been featured in a variety of media and has become a well-recognized symbol of Coney Island, a recreational retreat New Yorkers have enjoyed for over a century and a half; that its popularity and exemplary safety record throughout its sixty-nine years have encouraged approximately thirty million pleasure seekers to ride it.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Wonder Wheel, 3059 West 12th Street, Borough of Brooklyn and designates as its Landmark Site: Brooklyn Tax Map Block 8696, Lot 145; that portion of Block 8696, Lot 140 consisting of the parcel of land over which the Wonder Wheel projects, for which there is an easement; the equivalent portion of Jones Walk over which the Wonder Wheel projects; and the portion of the sidewalk of West 12th Street over which the Wonder Wheel neon sign projects.

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Wonder Wheel and signs - view from south



Wonder Wheel neon sign at West 12th Street