

CHILDS RESTAURANT BUILDING, 1208 Surf Avenue (aka 1202-1212 Surf Avenue, 3002-3014 West 12th Street), Brooklyn.
Built 1917; John C. Westervelt, architect.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 8694 Lot 18.

On March 23, 2010 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Childs Restaurant Building, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were 10 speakers in favor of designation, including representatives of Councilmember Dominic Recchia, Coney Island USA, Save Coney Island, Coney Island History Project, the Municipal Art Society, the Landmarks Conservancy, the Historic Districts Council, and the architect for the building. There were no speakers opposed to designation. The Commission has received more than 60 letters and emails in support of designation.

Summary

The Childs Restaurant Building on Surf Avenue in Coney Island was the first restaurant built for this well-known chain in Coney Island, at a time when the area was changing from its somewhat seedy aura of summer amusements to a wholesome, family resort that could be enjoyed year-round. The Childs Restaurant chain, begun in 1889, developed as small luncheonettes that catered to working people, where one could find decent meals for a reasonable price in a clean environment. As such, it was the perfect type of establishment for the “new Coney Island.” This building was constructed in 1917 in West Brighton near the terminus of the Prospect Park and Coney Island Railway line and close by many of the most famous amusements of the area. Childs Restaurant filled the need for a respectable but not expensive restaurant for the many working-class New Yorkers who flocked to the beach for a relaxing day in the sun. As the area prospered, a second and larger Childs was built at 21st Street facing the new Boardwalk. This first restaurant continued to operate in this location until 1943 when the property was leased to the Blue Bird Casino and restaurant. During the following years the building continued to house restaurants, clubs and other activities related to Coney Island’s amusements. It was the site of David Rosen’s Wonderland Circus Sideshow and, since 2007, has been the location of Coney Island U.S.A. and the Coney Island Museum, which documents the history of this famous New York City neighborhood. Originally designed by John C. Westervelt who worked for the Childs chain for many years, the building displays elements of the Spanish Revival style, seen in its overhanging red tile roof, round-arched openings and white facade. Its wide arches facing two streets served as grand welcoming gestures to crowds passing by, while the style suggests a warm Mediterranean resort and hint at the fun to be had in Coney Island. This building is a rare survivor from a many years of Coney Island history, beginning when an assortment of amusements and the sea air attracted thousands of pleasure-seekers escaping from the nearby hot city through the present day.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Coney Island¹

Although the western end of Coney Island had achieved some popularity as a rustic seaside resort early in the 19th century, it also gained an unsavory reputation for its gambling, pick-pockets and prostitution. The real growth of Coney Island as a resort came about in the 1870s when five new railroads were constructed to connect the island with the rest of Brooklyn. These were built by businessmen and entrepreneurs who developed large hotels and wanted to provide easy access from Brooklyn and Manhattan to attract a higher-end clientele than those who frequented the western side. Austin Corbin built the luxurious Manhattan Beach Hotel in 1877 on the far eastern end, served by the New York and Manhattan Beach Railway with direct connections to lower Manhattan. Just to the west of this was the huge Brighton Beach Hotel opened in 1878. Its clientele were generally from Brooklyn's middle-class business community and their families traveled to Coney Island via the Brooklyn, Flatbush, and Coney Island Railroad from Prospect Park.

Between Brighton Beach and the less savory environs of the far western point lay West Brighton, an area that became the island's entertainment section and was served by the Prospect Park & Coney Island Railroad, commonly known as the Culver Line. Carrying numerous day-trippers away from their teeming tenements, this train terminated at a large depot near 17th Street across from Culver Plaza, a spacious open area filled with colorful flowers. West Brighton became the site of numerous bathing pavilions, restaurants, saloons, variety shows, small stores, games and unusual attractions such as the "Elephant Colossus" (built 1879, destroyed by fire in 1896) and the Iron Tower (imported from the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876). West Brighton was "Coney's true entertainment district, attracting the lion's share of the island's visitors."²

During the 1890s West Brighton was the site of many innovations that increased the fame and popularity of Coney Island, including mechanical amusements such as carousels and roller coasters, hot dogs, and mixed gender public bathing. The Ferris Wheel, modeled after the original designed for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, was brought to Coney Island in 1894.³ In 1895, Paul Boyton opened Sea Lion Park, the first outdoor amusement park in the world, which included live sea lions and a number of new mechanical rides.⁴ A series of disastrous fires in the 1890s destroyed many of the area's flimsy wooden structures and opened large sections for redevelopment. With the goal of creating a "new" Coney Island that would attract more families and limit alcohol consumption, George C. Tilyou opened Steeplechase Park in 1897, including in his park a mechanical race track and a small version of the original Ferris Wheel.⁵ It was so successful that similar parks, such as Luna Park (1903) and Dreamland (1904) soon followed, offering more rides, entertainments, and a fantasy world of exotic architecture, bright lights, and unusual sights. The Bowery (named after the street of the same name in Manhattan) continued to serve as the island's midway, with numerous small stands for rides, shooting galleries, arcades, and saloons, as well as palmists, dance halls, and photo galleries. By 1900, Sunday crowds reached more than 500,000 and lines for the various amusements often lasted well into the night.

More than any other area on the island, West Brighton...appealed to a working-class crowd, bringing together established groups and recent immigrants who in everyday life were often segregated into separate neighborhoods and work places.⁶

During the early years of the 20th century, Luna Park and Dreamland were destroyed by fire. The area's racetracks were closed and the grand hotels to the east ceased to attract their previous crowds. In another effort to renew the neighborhood, the Coney Island Board of Trade was

formed by 1916, with membership consisting of successful local businessmen who had a sense of responsibility to improve the district for the sake of their own and other businesses. The summer season of 1916 opened with a pledge from this group to create an area that was “sanitary, safe, and sane.”⁷ Their goal was to impose “fair dealing,” with “no faking” to make sure that visitors had a good time and would want to come back again. They worked to encourage excursions to bring more people to Coney Island. Their publicity brochure stated that “Coney is better, bigger, cleaner and more wholesome than world’s fairs.”⁸

These efforts had several practical effects. Sanitation was improved by providing more garbage cans with more frequent pick-up. There was greater cooperation with local police, and Surf Avenue was rebuilt with a smooth asphalt surface. The city subway system was extended to the area in 1920, allowing New Yorkers from all parts of New York to reach the beach for only five cents. After this, approximately one million visitors came to Coney Island each summer day. It soon became obvious that something had to be done to alleviate the resulting congestion and to allow for better fire-fighting access to battle the huge conflagrations that periodically decimated the area. A broad pedestrian boardwalk was constructed along the beach, with the first section opening in 1923, stretching four miles from Brighton Beach to Sea Gate. Additionally some of the area’s streets were widened⁹ destroying many smaller buildings in the process. These improvements changed the character of Coney Island and the resort attracted more families and was used during more times of the year.

Restaurants on Coney Island

Although clams were plentiful on the shoreline and many people in the 19th century came to Coney Island for picnics and clambakes, before long a number of restaurants also developed to feed the huge crowds that assembled there. Charles Feltman began selling hot dogs from his hot food wagon in 1871 as an easy-to-eat meal. As his business expanded, he leased a tiny plot of land along the shoreline and sold thousands of hot dogs to hungry visitors. In 1874 he bought a lot at West 10th Street and Surf Avenue, eventually expanding it to include several huge beer gardens serving beer, hot dogs and ice cream with German bands and Tyrolean singers entertaining his customers.¹⁰ Stauch’s Restaurant, located on the Bowery, was another local institution that appealed to an upper class clientele with its dining room and dance hall. Nathan’s started its hotdog stand in 1916 at the corner of Surf and Stillwell avenues. Although it took a while for this business to gain popularity, Nathan’s sold its one hundred millionth hot dog in 1955 and the store is still located at the same intersection.¹¹

The Child’s restaurant chain was expanding rapidly at this time and the idea of opening a branch at this busy and popular area made sense for the business.

Childs Restaurant

The restaurant as a unique place to take a meal began to gain popularity in this country after the Civil War.¹² Although travelers had always been able to obtain food at inns and taverns, and later at hotel dining rooms, those living at home generally ate at home. Eating somewhere else was a new idea, related to a modern urban and industrial lifestyle. By the 1830s, members of the Del-Monico family established several Manhattan locales to supply New York’s elite with replicas of “Parisian” cuisine. At the same time, soup kitchens and one-cent coffee stands began to provide food for the destitute, while immigrants started cafes and beer gardens to recreate a taste of the old country for their fellow émigrés. After the Civil War, other restaurants including saloons, coffee shops and oyster bars began to cater to the working class, with low-priced fare that was available during extended hours, not just at set mealtimes. Lunch-counters became common after the invention of the soda drink, when stores with these popular features began to add light food such as sandwiches to the sodas and desserts already served there.¹³

The Childs Restaurant chain, begun in 1889, came out of this lunch-counter tradition. Samuel and William Childs, two brothers originally from New Jersey, learned the restaurant business by working for A.W. Dennett, owner of several restaurants in New York, Philadelphia and Boston.¹⁴ With \$1,600 and some second-hand furniture, the brothers opened their first store on Cortlandt Street in Manhattan. It was so successful that they were able to open a second one several months later. They borrowed Dennett's idea of placing a chef in the window, preparing flapjacks, as a way to advertise their business. They also started to furnish their restaurants with white-tiled walls and floors, white marble table-tops, and waitresses dressed in starched white uniforms, to convey a sense of cleanliness. The hard surfaces tended to discourage patrons from lingering on the premises, allowing for quicker turnover and more business. After ten years they had ten profitable restaurants and by 1925, the company (which was incorporated in 1902) operated 107 restaurants in 33 cities in the United States and Canada.¹⁵

Many of the early Childs Restaurants were set in narrow storefronts designed in an "austerely-elegant" style, with white tile, mirrors, bentwood furniture and exposed ceiling fans,¹⁶ to complement and also to symbolize the simplicity and purity of the food. Most of the stores from these early years were designed by John C. Westervelt who worked as the company architect for many years.¹⁷ In the 1920s however, new designs began to be used, each suited more specifically to the location of the individual store.¹⁸ One of these was the William Van Alen design for a Childs restaurant on Fifth Avenue which, in a bow to the more refined character of that section of town, did not display the usual signage and white decor, but had dark, mission style interiors, with "dramatic use of large sheets of curved glass for corner windows."¹⁹ Another was the elegant Spanish Revival style building on the Boardwalk in Coney Island designed by Dennison & Hiron and built in 1923 (a designated New York City Landmark).

The Childs chain was responsible for several restaurant innovations, including a self-serve cafeteria. In 1898, at 130 Broadway, they piled a lunch counter high with sandwiches and pastry and trays on which to place them.²⁰ Cafeteria service proved to be very popular and was emulated at numerous other restaurants around the country. In 1927, due to health concerns by William Childs, the Childs restaurants served only vegetarian food and were known as the Childs Unique Dairy Lunch. After a severe drop in business attributed to the meatless policy, it was reversed the following year.

In 1925, the Childs Company branched out from the restaurant business and became a primary investor in a new midtown hotel, the Savoy Plaza, on the east side of Fifth Avenue between 58th and 59th Streets. A large Childs Restaurant in the Spanish Renaissance style was located within this hotel. Samuel Childs served as president of the company before he died in 1925. William Childs served as a director of the new hotel corporation, as well as president and later chairman of the Childs Company until he was removed from governance of the company by irate stockholders in 1928.²¹

The company and the restaurants continued to evolve over the years. After Prohibition was lifted in 1933, liquor and wine were served in some Childs outlets.²² In 1939, the company received the contract to provide food service at the New York World's Fair, where it sold over 16 million hot dogs. Although the organization suffered financial problems at different periods, it continued to operate for many years. In 1950, the Childs Company bought Louis Sherry, the ice cream makers, and was, in turn, purchased by Lucky Stores shortly afterwards.²³ At that time, the company owned restaurants in 14 American cities and three in Canada. In 1961, the chain was acquired by the Reise Brothers and in 1966 they opened the 90th Childs Restaurant on 52nd Street and Third Avenue in New York.²⁴

John C. Westervelt (1873-1934)²⁵

John Corley Westervelt was born in Ithaca, New York and educated at Cornell University, where he also served as a trustee for many years. He practiced architecture in New York City for 40 years, and was a member of the Architectural League of New York and the American Institute of Architects. Westervelt served as house architect for the Childs restaurant firm for more than 30 years, designing most of their restaurants in various cities. One of his more well-known designs was for the Childs Restaurant at the Savoy Plaza Hotel in Manhattan, which he rendered in the Spanish Renaissance style (demolished). Two other buildings designed by Westervelt can be seen in the Ladies Mile Historic District: 4 East 20th Street (1900-01), a neo-Grec style, cast-iron fronted department store and 184 Fifth Avenue (facade design, 1911), a commercial style store and loft building faced with white terra cotta.

Child's Restaurant, Coney Island

Childs Restaurant became known as a place one could buy a reasonable meal for a fair price. Having already established its reputation in other parts of New York the company opened this small restaurant at the corner of Surf Avenue and 12th Street in 1917, in the heart of the West Brighton entertainment area. The block of Surf Avenue where it was constructed was near the Columbia Hotel and Koster's Music Hall and also held a series of small, one and two-story structures for games and other amusements on Surf Avenue and what was then Thompson's Walk (later West 12th Street). Coney Island's popularity was increasing, and since Childs Restaurants were already well-known to New Yorkers its location on this busy spot made good business sense.

This Childs restaurant was a two-story structure with two designed facades, each displaying broad arched openings along the street, a tiled roof and an overhanging, bracketed cornice. The Spanish Revival style facade was created of white-painted concrete with decorative triangular panels of terra-cotta mosaics inset in the arch spandrels. The concrete helped make it fireproof and its dramatic style helped it fit into the resort atmosphere of Coney Island. The large arched openings may have been inspired by several nearby buildings that also faced the street with similar windows, possibly as a way of encouraging anyone strolling by to enter the establishment. Although the Spanish (or the variant Mediterranean) Revival style was more often found on buildings in warmer climates, such as in Florida or the Caribbean, the designer of this structure was hoping to suggest this same kind of vacation-oriented environment for a building in the heart of New York's most popular resort area.

The narrow side street where the restaurant was located was a private street called Thompson's Walk. As part of the area's general improvement plan in 1923, the city widened it from 30 to 60 feet, paved it and opened it as West 12th Street.²⁶ This necessitated the movement of the Child's building to the west, achieved by cutting the front piers so that it could be raised onto rails and slid farther from the widened street. The facade was then restored to its original appearance.

This building served the Child's restaurant chain for many years. When the Boardwalk was opened in 1923, the company opened a second, much larger restaurant at 21st Street (a designated New York City Landmark). Childs closed this store in the area's busy amusement section by 1943. From 1944 the building housed the Bluebird Casino and later other restaurants and clubs, as well as David Rosen's Wonderland Circus Sideshow. Since 2007, it has been owned by Coney Island USA and serves as the home of the Coney Island Museum which documents the history of this famous section of New York.

Description

The Childs Restaurant Building is located on the corner of Surf Avenue and 12th Street and has two designed facades that display the same motifs. The Surf Avenue facade is three bays wide while that on 12th Street has six bays. Constructed of brick covered with painted concrete, the building is two stories tall and is capped by a shallow pent roof that overhangs the facade and is topped by red Spanish tiles. The roof is supported on paired metal brackets with flat concrete panels between them. There are colorful, non-historic fabric signs attached to the wall space between each window that are suggestive of the kinds of banners that used to advertise Coney Island attractions during its heyday.

The Surf Avenue facade has three large, round-arched openings with non-historic metal-and-glass infill. The entrance is located within the center arch. The arches have remnants of painted concrete moldings along the edges of their openings. Large metal housing for roll-down metal gates is located over the windows and below the transoms. Triangular multi-colored mosaic panels are set in the arch spandrels. A concrete molding marks the top of the first story and a series of small, non-historic light fixtures extend horizontally from above it.

The second story has three rectangular window openings marked by painted concrete window sills. The original metal window frame is in place however, the glass has been replaced by two large panes. There are two rectangular vent openings in the cornice between the paired brackets that show up in the early tax photo.

The 12th Street facade is longer, with six bays displayed along its length. This side boasts similar motifs to those on Surf Avenue. There are six large, round-arched openings on the ground story. Only the first one nearest the corner has the full transom arch revealed since the others are covered by plywood and fabric signs. There is a service entrance with non-historic door located in the southernmost bay. Historic, concrete-covered piers flank the doorway and it is topped by a series of wires attached to the building. Non-historic roll-down metal gates are located above each archway. The concrete cornice carries around the building above the ground story. The second story has six rectangular windows with new glass and historic sash, except for the two southernmost windows in which the entire sash has been replaced.

A plastered and painted extension with mechanical housing extends above the roof at the southernmost corner of the building.

Report researched and written by
Virginia Kurshan
Research Department

NOTES

¹ The history of the Coney Island area is compiled from: "Coney Island," *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, Kenneth Jackson, Ed. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1997), 272-274; Federal Writers Project, *New York City Guide*, 471- 475; Landmarks Preservation Commission, *The Parachute Jump Designation Report (LP-1638)* (New York: City of New York, 1989), by David Breiner; "Coney Island" <http://naid.spsr.ucla.edu/coneyisland>, accessed on 10/30/2002; "Coney Island Historiography," <http://history.amusement-parks.com> accessed on 10/30/2002.

² Ellen M. Snyder-Grenier, *Brooklyn! An illustrated History* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1996), 182.

³This original Ferris wheel was replaced by a different one in 1920 and is now a designated New York City Landmark under the name of Wonder Wheel. Eric J. Ierardi, *Gravesend: The Home of Coney Island* (New York: Vantage Press: 1975), 83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 77. Sea Lion Park closed by 1902.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶ *Brooklyn!* 185.

⁷ "Coney Island Opens with a Conscience," *The New York Times*, May 21, 1916, E1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ This happened in 1923-24.

¹⁰ Feltman's served more than 3,500,000 customers by the time the subway opened at Coney Island.

¹¹ "Coney Island-Food & Dining," 1977, Jeffrey Stanton, found at http://naid.sppsr.ucla.edu/coney_island/articles/food.htm accessed on 10/30/2002.

¹² John Jakle & Keith Sculle, *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 20-23.

¹³ Sodas were invented in 1839 when Eugene Roussel of Philadelphia first added carbonated soda water to flavored syrups.

¹⁴ "Childs Restaurant Founder is Dead," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1925, 21.

¹⁵ The Childs Company sometimes rented these stores rather than purchasing them. The 1924 stock offering mentioned that Childs owned 28 restaurants at that time, including 14 in the Greater New York area. Others were located in rented space. *Childs Company, The Greatest Restaurant Chain*, Financial Statement prepared by Laird Bissell & Meeds, 1925.

¹⁶ Robert A. M. Stern, et al, *New York 1930, Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 275-6.

¹⁷ "J. C. Westervelt, Architect, 61, Dies," *The New York Times*, Apr. 9, 1934, 17.

¹⁸ By the late 1920s, some Childs stores, where it was appropriate for their particular neighborhoods, used a distinctive neon sign in a Streamlined moderne style announcing the company's name. For others, dance music was added, and the lights and furnishings softened.

¹⁹ *New York 1930*, 276. According to Stern, this 1925 storefront was the first example of this type of modern design in New York.

²⁰ Michael & Ariane Batterberry, *On the Town in New York* (New York: Rutledge, 1999), 187-189.

²¹ Stockholders were concerned about a severe drop in stock price for the company. Kenneth L. Austin, "Childs Company's Ups and Downs Touch Eating and Investing Public," *The New York Times*, Aug. 29, 1943. Some stockholders and managers elected S. W. Smith president of the company on December 12, 1928. William Childs and other members of the family mounted a proxy battle to oust Smith, but they were defeated and Childs ultimately gave up all connection to the company.

²² "George D. Strohmeier Is Dead; Led Chain of Childs Restaurants," *The New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1965, 39.

²³ "Childs Takes Over Louis Sherry; To Be Run as Separate Company," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1950, 54.

²⁴ "Childs Chain to Open 90th Restaurant Here," *The New York Times*, June 30, 1966, 63.

²⁵ Information about John C. Westervelt was compiled from his obituary in the *New York Times* (above); Henry F. and Elise R. Whitney, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* (Los Angeles: Hennesey & Ingalls, 1970), 646; and "John Corley Westervelt," *Who's Who in American Art I* (1936-7), 517.

²⁶ Brooklyn Topographical Bureau, map dated 1922-23.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Childs Restaurant Building has a special character and a 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, the Childs Restaurant Building, constructed in 1917 for the well-known Childs Restaurant chain, was built in the busy West Brighton section of Coney Island, the center of its amusement area; that it was constructed at a time when the businessmen of Coney Island were trying to strengthen the area's appeal to families and working people; that the Childs Restaurant chain had started in 1889 and its restaurants were well-known among working people for offering reasonable meals at affordable prices; that the Childs Restaurant was appropriate for this busy section, located near the subway stop, and operated successfully there for many years; that the building was designed by Childs' house architect, John C. Westervelt who created a stylish building in the Spanish Revival style that was fitting for the area's beach atmosphere; that the two-story building with large, round-arched openings created a sense of welcome in a bustling area and its multi-colored mosaic panels, paired brackets, and tile roof form a pleasing contrast with its white-painted facade; that after Childs Restaurant left, the building was used by a number of other amusement-related businesses, including the Blue Bird Casino and David Rosen's Wonderful Circus Sideshow, and is now home to the Coney Island Museum; that all these activities have provided continuous links to the early period when Coney Island became New York's playground.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 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 Childs Restaurant Building, 1208 Surf Avenue, Brooklyn, and designates as its Landmark Site Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 8694, Lot 18.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair

Pablo Vengoechea, Vice-Chair

Frederick Bland, Dianna Chapin, Michael Devonshire, Joan Gerner,

Christopher Moore, Margery Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan, Roberta Washington, Commissioners



Child's Restaurant Building

1208 Surf Avenue (aka 1202-1212 Surf Avenue,
3002-3014 West 12th Street)

Brooklyn

Brooklyn Tax Map Block 8694, Lot 18

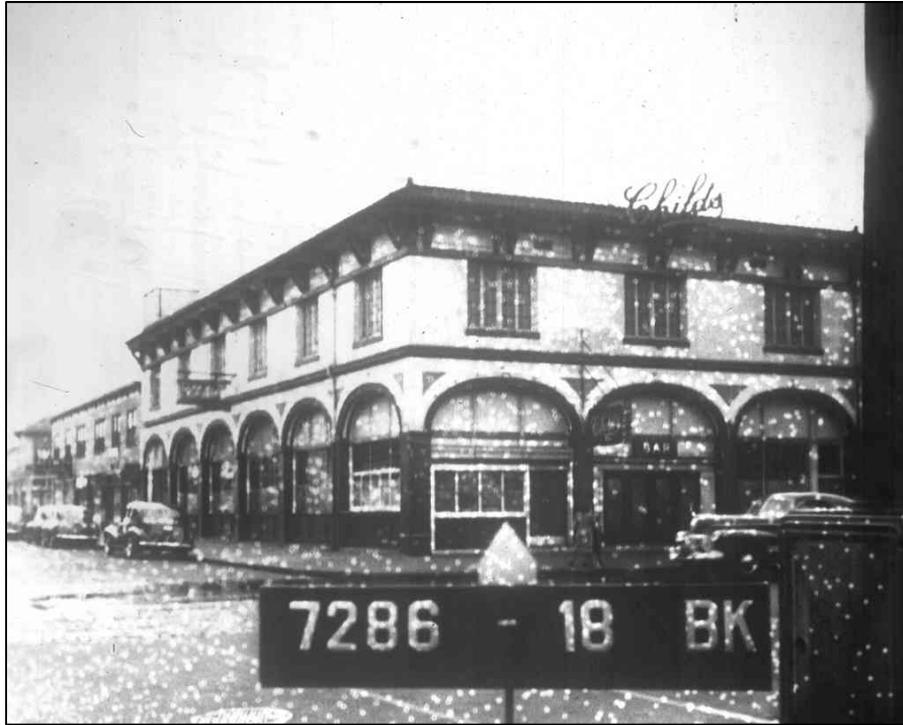
Photos: Christopher D. Brazee, 2010





Child's Restaurant Building
Facade details
Photos: Christopher D. Brazee, 2010

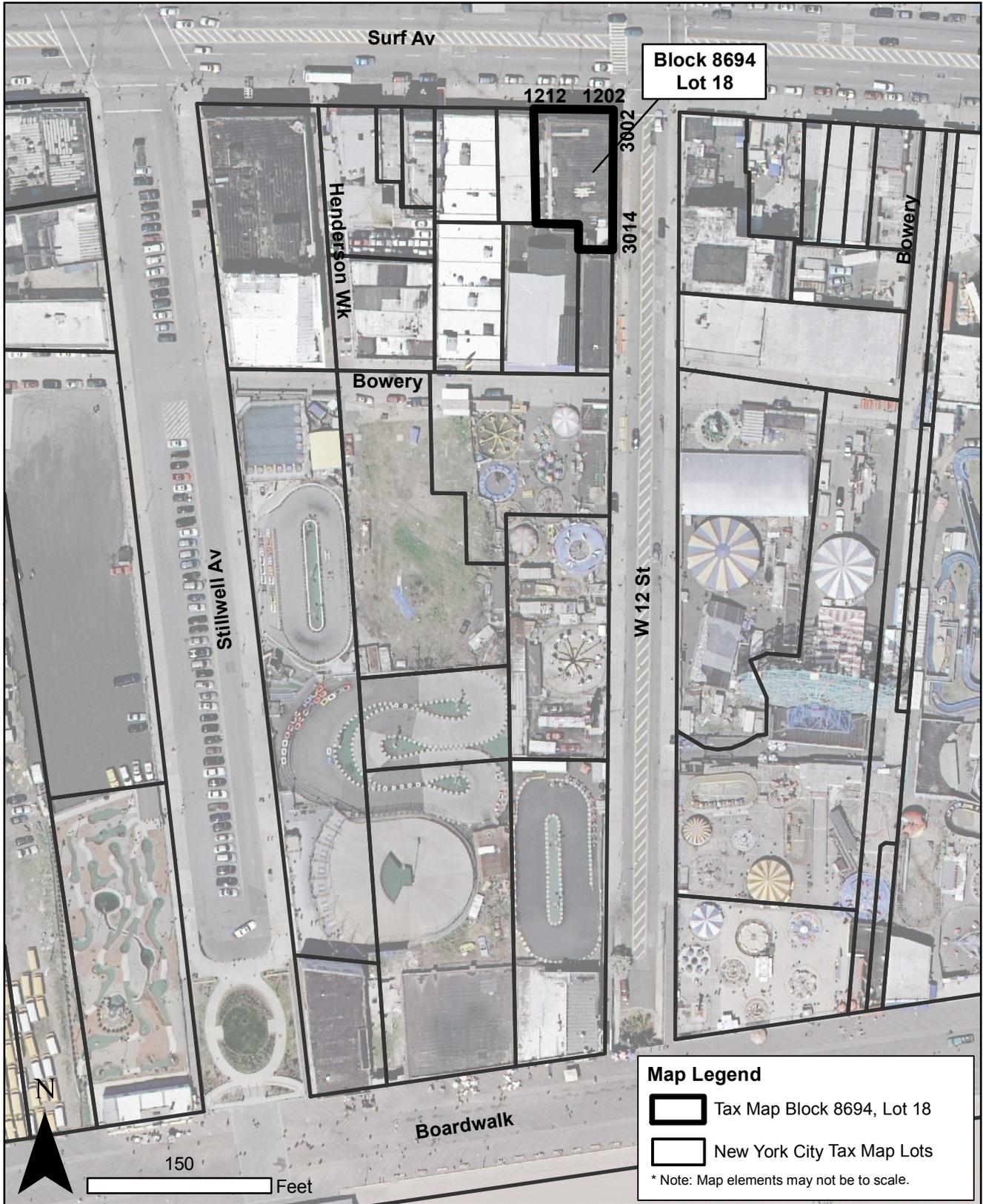




Child's Restaurant Building
Photo Source: New York City Department of Taxes, c. 1939



Child's Restaurant Building
Photo Source: New York City Department of Taxes, 1980



CHILDS RESTAURANT BUILDING (LP-2410), 1208 Surf Avenue (aka 1202-12 Surf Avenue; 3002-14 West 12th Street)
 Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 8694, Lot 18

Designated: January 11, 2011