

HISTORIC CATEGORY

# Child's Restaurant at Coney Island & Seaside Park

NEW YORK, NY  
SUBMITTED BY PULLMAN



Fig. 1: View of Ford Amphitheater at Coney Island

The former Child's Restaurant, located at 21st Street and the Riegelman Boardwalk in Coney Island, is a rare remnant of the old Coney Island of the early 20th century. The building is a deceptively large masonry box that has recently found new life as back-of-house facilities, the stage and box office for the Ford Amphitheater (Fig. 1). It also houses a 500-seat restaurant with a 90 ft (27 m) bar, and a rooftop event space along with several kitchens and refreshment centers.

The building was constructed in 1923 by the Child's Restaurant Corporation, a chain that was part of a wave of restaurants providing "reasonably priced meals" for "common people"—a new concept in the service world. Built before air conditioning, the large-windowed structure had kitchens in the cellar, patron facilities in the small area at the north end of the building, and the two-story main floor had food service along the west wall with the remainder of the space open to patrons. A baking station for biscuits was installed inside one of the large picture windows along the boardwalk as a not-so-subtle marketing ploy. As revolutionary as the inside was, the outside was also constructed to pull patrons west from the more active and populated sections of the boardwalk including Luna Park, Parachute Jump, Steeplechase and other attractions.

The landmark building was designed as if it washed up out of the sea; sand colored stucco walls dripping with exquisite terra cotta ornaments that included ships, seaweed, fish, crabs and lobsters, snails and Neptune which captured the imagination and wallets of passers-by. Elements of Spanish Colonial architecture, popular at several exhibitions, were incorporated to express the openness of the seaside and the welcoming nature of a comfortable, safe place to eat away from home or picnic basket.

The restaurant eventually closed after WWII, and the building was used for candy manufacturing before sitting vacant for a long period of time. Efforts to resurrect the vacant structure were undertaken, including its intermittent use as a roller rink. There were also several different attempts to

redevelop the property. In 2012, city-owned adjacent land and former street beds to the west of the structure would join to provide space for 5,000 seats and a one+ acre park.

## DETERIORATION AND RESTORATION PROGRAM

Due to the building's close proximity to the ocean, it has been highly affected by corrosion, erosion, biological growth, and freeze/thaw cycles. The result of the water effects was most prominent on the ornamental terra cotta pieces and stucco on the exterior walls, where erosion and biological growths caused the glazing to shake off the terra cotta bisque itself (Fig. 2). In addition, the western wall acted as a firebreak for a massive multi-block fire in 1932. The physical damage to the brick required the removal and replacement of the exterior wythe of brick. Salvaged common brick with similar physical properties was located and installed—reclaimed brick from Detroit was used that closely matched the moisture content and firing of the original brick for seamless integration.

A layer of incompatible 1960s stucco was removed from the south and east walls along with all asbestos-containing waterproofing materials, resulting in the discovery of numerous cracks related to deteriorated steel roof framing and miscellaneous steel installations including lintels. All of the façade steel had to be either repaired or replaced. Three cartouches surrounding the window openings on the corners of the building suffered the effects of steel deterioration from both the lintels and the decorative grilles (Fig. 3).

The terra cotta was also affected by biological growth and modifications to building openings to accommodate changes in use. Although many pieces were suitable for reuse, new cartouches, rondels and window and door surrounds were required. Existing pieces were removed from the building and sent as models for reproduction of color and sculpture. The original backup masonry walls were removed and rebuilt with salvaged common brick to their original five wythe widths. The sophistication and humor of the installation became apparent within the terra cotta pieces. Photographs from a 1924 *American Architect* article were extremely helpful in determining some of the very subtle differences in what appeared to be identical ornamentation.

Each of the medallion infill pieces had a gold luster glaze. Thirty-six glazes were developed from over 600 samples and a total of 752 new pieces were replicated for the building; 102 were salvaged and reset, and 171 were repaired on site. Extreme care was taken to match the original as closely as possible (Fig. 4). The assemblies were also laid out onsite in the yard and fit with other components such as the window grilles and plywood templates of openings to aid in proper placement and dimensional tolerances for each piece in an assembly (Fig. 5). Highly damaged terra cotta stones were replaced with newly replicated ones. The replication process began with printing a model of the original piece from a CNC machine which allowed a mold to be cast around the model. On-site, the pieces were carefully installed with modern stainless steel anchors and tied



Fig. 2: Water damage of ornamental terra cotta pieces



Fig. 3: Steel deterioration near window openings



Fig. 4: (a) Terra cotta detail before, (b) and after

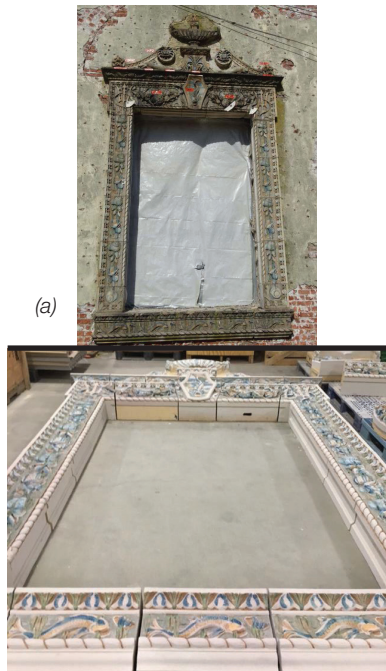


Fig. 5: (a) Original window before, (b) and window replica



Fig. 6: Scaffolding was erected and re-erected numerous times throughout the project



Fig. 7: New rooftop restaurant

in with the new reclaimed brick. It was essentially a large, three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.

The stucco was chosen to match the current beach sand color after six different stucco mockups were performed and given a rough wood float finish to match the original design intent. Existing metal grilles were restored; and new replacement slate was installed in the “blank” window at the east elevation.

On several occasions, scaffolding had to be built, worked on for several weeks, and then dismantled to make way for another critical path item—only to be rebuilt right after to continue the exterior work (Fig. 6). Custom scaffold towers were built to lift up to 950 lbs (430 kg) terra cotta units in place. The overall job was performed on traditional pipe-frame scaffolding.

## CONCLUSION

The project is a great example of adaptive reuse. A blighted brick box, adorned with some of the most spectacular terra cotta ever conceived (much less created and installed) was renovated to become a community center, restaurant, and amphitheater. The original themes and historic fabric were honored and restored, and the original use of a restaurant incorporated into the new design (Fig. 7).

The pre-construction phase of the project started in Fall 2014. The amphitheater, park, and remaining dining room restaurant opened in Summer 2016. The project was completed in 4,800 man-days, or 38,400 hours, without a safety incident. After decaying for years, the flagship of the Child’s Restaurant chain now is ready for a new, year-round life along the Coney Island boardwalk. ■

## Child’s Restaurant at Coney Island & Seaside Park

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