

## Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk: Survival of the Funnest

*By Andrew Schiffrin*

Pacific Ocean Park in Santa Monica, Nu-Pike in Long Beach, Playland in San Francisco, Belmont Park in San Diego—the list of large beachfront amusement parks on the California coast that are now gone is a long one. One might have been forgiven for assuming that they would eventually be joined by the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. For years, the boardwalk (owned by the Santa Cruz Seaside Company) seemed a quaint anachronism; and some local officials predicted a slow deterioration, followed finally by closure and increased pressures for conversion to other uses.

It appears, however, that the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk is not only healthy but vigorously so. The number of visitors—judging by the pressure on parking areas nearby—looks to be increasing every year, and the Seaside Company is buying up major properties in the adjacent area for long-term investments. In 1981 the company undertook a \$10 million renovation of the Cocoanut Grove ballroom and converted it into a small-scale, high-quality, convention and banquet facility. Gary Kyriazi, in *The Great American Amusement Parks* (Citadel Press, 1976), calls the boardwalk "without doubt ... the best and most beautiful seaside amusement park in the nation." How has the Santa Cruz amusement park, which is not even located in a large city, continued to prosper while other coastal parks have gone under?

Although many factors contribute to its success, the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk is both a social phenomenon and an economic reality. The nature of the park's market and the value of its land are two important reasons for the park's success. Its ability to continue to draw customers and its inability to convert to a "higher and better" land use maintain its vitality.

Tourists first started coming to Santa Cruz in 1865, when John Leibrandt built a public bathhouse near the mouth of the San Lorenzo River. Other bathhouses soon followed, catering to those seeking the "natural medicine" of a dip in salt water and needing a place to change. (Women in those days swam covered ankles to neck in wool suits that weighed twenty pounds when wet.) By the end of the nineteenth century, plans were being laid for a casino and boardwalk based on the Coney Island and Atlantic City models.

Fred Swanton's Neptune Casino opened in 1904. Twenty-two months later, on June 22, 1906, it was destroyed by fire; but by October of the same year Swanton was laying the foundation for another. The new Cocoanut Grove ballroom, along with an indoor swimming pool, a pleasure pier, and a boardwalk, opened in June of 1907. The boardwalk's centerpiece attraction, the Giant Dipper roller coaster, opened in 1924 and continues to thrill riders today.

During the 1930s, tourists from the San Francisco Bay Area, ninety miles north of Santa Cruz, could take the Southern Pacific Railroad's "Suntan Special" right to the front gate of the boardwalk. They came to hear the greatest names of the Big Band era play at the Cocoanut Grove—Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, and the Dorsey brothers. Across the country, meanwhile, most other amusement parks were falling on hard times. As income shrank during the Depression, and as

the automobile opened up new recreational possibilities, traditional parks lost some of their appeal. By 1936, the 1,500 parks that had existed in 1919 had dwindled to about five hundred.

The end of World War II gave a boost to those which remained, but the renaissance was short-lived. To some extent it seems easy to explain the demise of amusement parks in terms of changing cultural values or, more precisely, the growing sophistication of the middle class: as people had more money to spend after World War II, they determined to spend it on what they considered higher quality entertainments. By this time, though, many of the older parks had a seedy, run-down appearance and unsavory reputation—not entirely undeserved. The new amusement parks needed a strong theme, expensive advertising, and a cover price to keep out the riffraff.

At just about the same time, a new competitor arrived on the scene to undermine attendance.

"New amusement parks were being planned again in the late 1940s, but the television craze of the early 1950s put people back in their homes, and the amusement industry, right along with the motion picture industry, suddenly looked bleak again. (Kyriazi)"

Television offered a cheap alternative and led people to expect more glitz and flash from their amusements—"show biz" quality.

Disneyland, which burst on the scene in the mid 1950s, and the array of theme parks which followed not only had these qualities but also offered cleanliness, safety, and lavishly landscaped outdoor environments. Many traditional amusement parks, faced with a carny image, old and deteriorating facilities, and problems with rowdy teenagers, were unable to compete and started a downward slide.

A 1977 article in Theatre Arts by cultural historian Brooks McNamara explained the closing of the Palisades Amusement Park across the Hudson River from New York City:

"The combination of escalating land values near the city, and the increasingly bad press accorded traditional amusement parks have made Palisades worth less as an operating business than the land on which it stood—the story repeated all over America from World War II onward."

Certainly, skyrocketing land values over the last twenty years along the coast in California's metropolitan areas have played a major role in the loss of the other coastal amusement parks. The market demand to convert these relatively large parcels of land to other uses offering a significantly higher return can easily be seen as overwhelming the cash flow potential from a difficult- and expensive-to-run amusement park.

These same factors also applied to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, however. Throughout much of the 1960s, the political vision for Santa Cruz was based on the desire for major growth. The 1964 General Plan anticipated major freeways running through the city and connecting to the beachfront areas, a major new University of California campus, a population of 100,000 by 1985 (it is now about 44,000), and major hotel development along the ocean front from the Municipal Wharf very near the amusement park to Lighthouse Field about a mile away. A major development for Lighthouse Field (to consist of a seven-story Hilton Hotel, convention center, shopping center, and housing project) was actively pursued into the early 1970s. The political leadership at that time was closely allied with the business leadership and welcomed not only the independent growth of Santa Cruz but its close integration, through a freeway over the mountains, with the Santa Clara Valley.

There are two aspects of land value that are relevant here—the market demand for the land in an alternate use and the political possibility of converting it to that use. Looking first at the potential of the boardwalk property in residential and/or hotel uses, it seems likely that, given the growth pressures in Santa Cruz, the demand for such uses in that location would be strong, if the land were available. Charles Canfield, the current president of the Seaside Company, cites the shape and size of the boardwalk's land—a narrow strip between the railroad and the sea, in places only seventy feet wide—as a factor in reducing the demand for the property. Other observers, however, dismiss the importance of

the odd shape, agreeing that any bit of coastal real estate has to be considered desirable. Although the level of demand is probably less than it would be in San Francisco and Long Beach, it has still been significant.

Canfield gives much of the credit for the boardwalk's survival to his father, Laurence, who became president of the company in 1952. According to Charles, his father had grown up in Santa Cruz and liked the challenge of keeping the park alive. Many other parks had been family owned he explained, but as they were passed from one generation to the next interest in the operations was spread out, and infighting among the family members resulted. Finally, with no one left with the will to maintain the parks in the face of adversity, the families sold out.

Under Laurence's stewardship, the 1950s and 1960s were a time of reinvestment and expansion rather than consolidation and loss cutting. Management took some chances, but they were taken on the basis of careful long-range projections and studies. The rebuilding effort was aimed at increasing security, keeping the facilities clean, and catering to families. The park is actively patrolled by a low-key but effective security force, and aside from a few hassles from bikers in the early 1960s, crowd problems never got out of hand. The boardwalk is perceived as—and is, in fact—a safe and congenial place for the well-behaved family to visit and, maybe even more important economically, for parents to allow their teenagers to visit.

While the company, invests in a major new ride every few years, which is the industry standard, they are not extravagant about it. Some amusement parks sought to change with the times and added themes, entertainment, animals, etc. The Seaside Company has not done this to any great extent. They have worked for modest growth by providing a high-quality traditional amusement park rather than by spending a fortune on massive improvements which then require a surge in attendance to pay for them.

Finally, the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk has served as an amusement area for Bay Area residents since the turn of the century, and while over the last 30 years the public in general has become less interested in this kind of amusement park, the increased population, particularly in the San Jose area, has provided a rapidly growing base of support. The sound management policies of the Seaside Company have allowed them to continue to attract these potential customers, and the attendance now runs 1.5 to 2 million visitors per year.

While the Seaside Company was managing to stave off economic pressures, another factor in the demand for alternate uses was changing. The pressure to convert land is, to some extent at least, a function of the political process. The high-growth vision of the sixties, if carried out, would have increased tremendously the demand for conversion of the amusement park. While the market for the amusement park itself would have grown, the increased population, better access, and the lack of centrally located coastal locations would have created massive pressures for conversion.

The vision of sustained civic growth began to fall apart in the early seventies. First, the Route 17 freeway connection to San Jose was rejected by the County Board of Supervisors. The Lighthouse Point project was voted down at the city polls and, finally, by the Coastal Commission. The beach loop linking Highway 1, Route 17, and the boardwalk, and other major development projects never got off the ground. The advocates for low growth and environmental protection, calling for the preservation of Santa Cruz's small town quality, found support within the traditional community as well as from the students, which the founding of the university, in 1965 had brought to town.

In 1979, a growth management initiative passed, strictly limiting annual growth within the city and establishing a greenbelt of major parcels on its fringes to be protected from urban development until 1990. Finally, in 1981, when a majority was elected to the City Council which supported low growth (it had been a minority since 1973), the transformation in vision was complete.

The current political leadership is committed not only to low growth but also to the preservation of the city's existing neighborhoods and "quality of life." High-rise residential projects and hotels along the beachfront are antithetical to that vision. It is probably clear to all concerned that any proposal to convert the amusement park to such uses would be soundly defeated.

There are, then, two major reasons why the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk continues to thrive while the other coastal amusement parks have disappeared. First, it is blessed with competent and dedicated management which operates a park still attractive to large numbers of people. And second, the value of the land must respect the political values in the community. The predominant political values in the Santa Cruz community of low growth and preservation of a small town feeling have prevented the increase in land value which would stimulate conversion. In the other coastal communities it was possible to obtain approval for the conversion of their amusement parks: the proponents could make economic arguments to which the cities responded. In Santa Cruz, however, these arguments would now be rejected.

The Santa Cruz waterfront offers its residents as well as the people of California their only remaining chance to sun themselves on the beach, watch the pelicans glide over the ocean, and scream their hearts out on a roller coaster—all in the same afternoon.

## Sources

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