



# THRILL RIDE

DESIGNING THEME PARK RIDES AND MARQUEE ENTERTAINMENT VENUES PREPARED THIS ENGINEER TO TACKLE ASBURY PARK'S BOARDWALK REDEVELOPMENT

BY LAURA KOLNOSKI • PHOTOS © AMESSE PHOTOGRAPHY

**W**hirled winds of rebirth and reinvention have swept over Asbury Park in the past decade, bringing a welcome, if sometimes dizzying, array of new things to see and do while attracting ever-growing crowds eager to experience them all. Unprecedented excitement has gripped New Jersey's City by the Sea, eliciting the inevitable question: What's next?

For answers, we turned to George Ladyman, Jr., senior vice president and director of boardwalk redevelopment for Madison Marquette, the firm responsible for the recreation of the city's world-famous boardwalk. The overall project spans 30 acres and a mile of beachfront from Deal to Ocean Grove, where much has already been successfully accomplished.

Ladyman was our enthusiastic guide on an exclusive, behind-the-scenes tour offering glimpses into ongoing construction as well as what's on the drawing board. Proud of what's been accomplished, he expressed appreciation of his historic environs and exuded a "you ain't seen nothin' yet" attitude. What guides the process, he stressed, is maintaining the city's unique identity.



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"There's a certain grittiness we want to keep, but we also want to move it forward," he said. "There are tons of moving pieces. We could build right now; people wonder why we haven't. You have to get the history right along with other components like financing, absorption, visitation." ("Absorption" refers to the rate at which the market can successfully accept and patronize new attractions, residences, and retail, he explained.)

Ladyman is officially responsible for the development, construction, management, and business operations of the boardwalk area's various components. That includes the sector's entertainment venues, which now host more than 600 shows, concerts, and events annually. Once completed, the project will include 350,000 square feet of retail, dining, and entertainment space, eight performance and cultural venues, and hotel and residential units. "We hope to build out what we control by 2022," Ladyman said.

## PROGRESS REPORT

The boardwalk already teems with diverse life, drawing visitors year-round. According to Ladyman, 10 to 15 percent are international travelers who attend festivals, concerts, and events

outdoors and in legendary venues like The Stone Pony, the Wonder Bar, Convention Hall, and the Paramount Theater.

Madison Marquette now owns the Pony and Wonder Bar on Ocean Avenue, which have been improved though not substantially altered. The Wonder Bar's previous owners still run the hot spot, and many Stone Pony staffers are venue veterans, ensuring tradition continues.

Nearby, the boutique Asbury Hotel, which opened in 2016 in the former Salvation Army building, offers popular entertainment and events all year. Its sister property, the adjacent Asbury Lanes, got a major facelift and debuted to rave reviews last year. Nearing completion on Ocean Avenue is the new Asbury Ocean Club Surfside Resort & Residences, a 17-floor complex with 260 residential units, public areas including retail and entertainment, amenities galore, and a hotel slated to open later this year.

The Asbury Ocean Club, the hotel, and other portions of the city's redevelopment are the purview of iStar, Asbury Park's master developer, which is responsible for about 20 projects in the downtown area. Madison Marquette, Ladyman explained, decided to partner with iStar to focus solely on the boardwalk. Sackman Enterprises, a third developer, specializes in restoring





A teacher and lecturer at the Pratt Institute, his designs have been featured in *Power and Motoryacht* magazine, *Cinefix*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, The Discovery Channel, and Bloomberg Television. Film and video credits include executive producer of special venue films, IWERKS Entertainment and Dream Quest Images, *The Right Stuff*, *Mach 1 Adventure*, and *Space Shuttle America*.

#### BACK ON THE BOARDS

Opening a heavy steel door in the pavement in a secure area near the boardwalk's north end, Ladyman revealed an underground tunnel running south to the Steam Plant adjacent to the Casino. "That's how buildings along the boardwalk were originally heated," he explained. Pointing at Sunset Pavilion, he said, "All the buildings were originally designed with passages under or over the boardwalk because in the early 20th century, people couldn't be on the boards in bathing suits."

"We're trying to time the redevelopment to pay homage to the past and be sensitive to today's residents," he continued. "We see the entire town. The uplift goes from the downtown to the waterfront, drives visitation, and enhances the experi-

ence." At the Casino, newlyweds posed before murals painted by professional artists, an attraction that began in 2015 as a project called Sea Change: Wooden Walls Art Installation.

"It's become an institutional icon—it's so Asbury," Ladyman said. "It was designed to be temporary, but people have fallen in love with the murals. We try to attract different levels of guests of all ages and tastes. That makes visitors come and businesses want to be here, driving a lot of the activity. We are also seeing it in retail, which is up about 5 percent."

Ladyman added that the small seasonal waterpark on the boardwalk has been "hugely successful," and hinted that more rides could be coming, an option that seems popular with the public.

"We're not a mall, we're a curated experience," he summed up. "The evolution is to curate offerings to get people to stay and live here. We've proved we are in it for the long run. This is the future of Asbury." ■

George Ladyman, Jr.  
madisonmarquette.com / georgeladyman.com

#### SPOTLIGHT

##### CONVENTION HALL

Convention Hall's majestic exterior was designed by the same architects who designed Grand Central Station. While most marvel at its architecture, many fret that one of the boardwalk's most beloved structures is vulnerable to future storms. George Ladyman, Jr., senior vice president and director of boardwalk redevelopment for Madison Marquette, explained, however, that significant protections and upgrades have already been completed.

The exterior promenades were badly damaged by Superstorm Sandy, and the ocean-facing side has been closed since then. Heralding Asbury's comeback, bar/ restaurants opened on the north and south promenades early on. Now packed in summer with action spilling onto the sand, the north side Anchor Bar maintains an indoor space off-season. Convention Hall is alive with events,



##### FIFTH AVENUE PAVILION

Work continues at the reimagined pavilion, where a new coastal cuisine restaurant called the Iron Whale is nearing completion adjacent to Tim McLoone's Supper Club and the Robinson Ale House. On the boardwalk level, the space will feature an open-kitchen concept viewable from

opened the Asbury Park Museum, a 1,400-square-foot temporary pop-up exhibit in the pavilion.

"The museum highlights the rich heritage of Asbury Park and pays homage to legendary locals and their contributions and accomplishments to this wonderful city," said Madison Marquette Property Manager Austin Leopold.

##### STONE PONY SUMMER STAGE

A rockin' hot spot in season, the Stone Pony's adjacent outdoor Summer Stage sits on a lot that will eventually be developed, which means a new location must be chosen. "With the rich history and excitement the outdoor venue brings to Asbury Park," said Ladyman, "we're looking at opportunities to keep that in place, thus exploring ways to relocate and/or create a new Stone Pony Summer Stage performance venue. We have some exciting locations in mind."

##### CASINO

Ladyman hinted that a return of the long-lamented Carousel is under consideration. As for the empty Steam Plant south of the Carousel and Casino structures, he said talks with dining and entertainment interests are ongoing and an announcement could be imminent.

"We're being thoughtful about the process involving the Casino, where some design and development possibilities are currently being explored. We want to find the right mix, [but] it must be economically viable and maintain its character." ■



retail, and dining options year-round. The building has a new, million-dollar roof and underwent facade restoration and restroom renovations. Inside the hall's Grand Arcade, the terrazzo floor was redone. Meanwhile, an array of upgrades, including superior acoustics, are making the 1,600-seat Paramount Theatre sparkle anew, and Ladyman reported that the Asbury Oyster Bar was recently voted the No. 1 Oyster Bar in the United States on Thrillist.

the bar, a fireplace, an indoor dining room, bar seating, and outdoor boardwalk dining. A glass-enclosed sea-view restaurant will occupy the upper level, which will also house the renovated open-air bandshell. A ground-floor bar is also planned.

The bandshell should open later this year with music, movies, and other events. The restaurant's second story will look out on the performance venue.

In December, in a surprise to locals and visitors alike, Madison Marquette