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Politics of play

Dominic Lutyens returns to the playground to try out the latest design concepts

Childhood memories of playgrounds usually evoke carefree times. Yet to creators and fans of the most cutting-edge play areas, more in the adventure playground vein, these are radically different from conventional facilities, and far more liberal and liberating.

Particularly impressive is US architect David Rockwell's recently opened Imagination Playground, at Burling Slip in downtown Manhattan. Partly inspired by New York's innovative Underhill Playground and Teardrop Park play areas, it features a waterfall, climbing rope, lookout ramp with telescopes, two-tier sandpit, nautical-looking funnels fitted with rotating wheels, bell chimes and weathervanes and sky-blue, biodegradable foam blocks in around 20 shapes which encourage open-ended play.

These shapes are termed 'loose parts' and are deliberately neutral and non-prescriptive. The idea is that children can move them about and

assemble them however they please. This idea isn't new to adventure playgrounds, though they usually take the form of timber telegraph poles, rope and old car tyres.

Static elements bought from a catalogue are considered a no-no. Champions of adventure playgrounds believe children are happiest playing in the wild, so favour natural materials, while metal frames (unpleasantly cold to the touch in winter) and plastics are often frowned on, as is what is dismissively called 'KFC', short for kit, fencing, carpet (a wet-pour rubber surfacing), the default materials used in unimaginative playgrounds.

A crucial tenet of adventure playgrounds is that they are child-directed. The adults, or 'playworkers', supervise and facilitate rather than direct play.

Children are closely, democratically involved in the playgrounds' creation. 'We encourage them to produce designs,' says Simon Rix of Design and

Build Play, a London-based playground design consultancy and construction charity. 'They make models, then vote for their favourites by putting stickers on them. We then look at them for their buildability and potential to be used for play. Once the basic building work has been done, the children get involved in some tasks: they can't lift heavy loads, but do use hammers, drills, electric jigsaws and screwdrivers.'

Not surprisingly, given their liberal ethos, adventure playgrounds thrived in the anti-authoritarian climate of the 1960s and 1970s. But pre-dating these by some years were such seminal examples as Danish landscape designer Carl Sorensen's 'junk playground', created in the deprived Copenhagen area of Emdrup in 1943. Filled with moveable, inexpensive scrap (cardboard boxes and tree branches, for example), its organic, kinetic qualities were meant to simulate nature and redress the fact that children's desire to explore and exercise

Playing fare

The best adventure playground design focuses on the use of natural materials and is driven by how children actually behave in such environments. **Dominic Lutyens** investigates current thinking, and discovers some intriguing examples of co-design



1 Arc in the Park playground in Newham, London E16

2 Rockingham adventure playground in Dickens Square, London SE1

3 and 5 Architect David Rockwell's recently opened Imagination Playground, at Burling Slip in downtown Manhattan, New York

4 Trefusis Playing Fields in Redruth, Cornwall



3 & 5 Frank Oudeman

their imaginations is limited in cities where access to buildings is frequently barred. Junk playgrounds are also known as 'compensatory playgrounds' for this reason.

Soon after, British landscape architect and child welfare campaigner Lady Allen of Hurtwood was so impressed by Sorensen's idea that she imported it to the UK, where it was renamed 'adventure playground', as this sounded more positive. The first was built in Camberwell, London, in 1948. By 1973, 61 had been constructed around the country, although further growth was curbed in the 1980s during the rate-capping Margaret Thatcher years. Now the coalition Government, as part of its spending cuts, may well freeze the £235m Playbuilder scheme, inherited from Labour, which is creating 3500 playgrounds across England.

Clearly, this could be a blow to the adventure playground movement. Even so, adventure playgrounds – half of them run by the voluntary

sector and half by local authorities – have thrived in recent years in the UK. Their design has in part been influenced by the writings of playworker and theorist Bob Hughes, who claims to have identified 16 types of play beyond 'gross motor play' – the term for basic body movements like running or climbing. 'These types play with such things as words, objects, risk, fear, drama, symbolism and inventiveness,' says Penny Wilson, a renowned UK playworker with whom Rockwell discussed Imagination Playground.

In London particularly, adventurous adventure playgrounds include White Horse and Glamis in Tower Hamlets, Somerford Grove near Tottenham Hotspur Football Club's stadium, John the Baptist School in Hoxton and Arc in the Park in Newham. Another, Waterside Play and Youth Project in Islington, which opened in July, features underground tunnels and dens, which children helped to build, and trees used as aerial walkways.

There are different facets to the adventure playground phenomenon. Play consultant Grant Lambie, of the organisation Free Play, which builds bespoke play areas, is inspired by the Slow Food movement and regards all playgrounds as works in progress. 'You need to keep adding to playgrounds to keep rejuvenating them,' says Lambie.

Others feel that today's adventure playgrounds aren't groundbreaking or inclusive enough. Phil Doyle, of playground design consultancy Playlink, advocates demarcating playgrounds with natural elements – hedges, mounds, ditches and informal seating – rather than the fencing which usually encloses adventure playgrounds. He cites Trefusis Playing Fields in Redruth, Cornwall, which is fringed by a low, grass-topped wall, as a good example. Doyle's thoughts are a good metaphor for the fact that adventure playground design is in a state of flux – just as its exponents would wish it to be. ■

