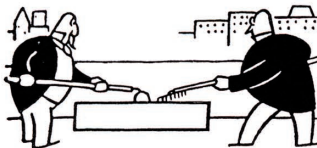


COMEBACK
SAND MEN



A couple of weeks ago, the Parks Department announced that the architect David Rockwell had designed an innovative playground to be constructed near the South Street Seaport. In the days that followed, the *Times* published five articles on the subject; one front-page headline read, “NEW YORK TRIES TO THINK OUTSIDE THE SANDBOX.” Yet one of the more radical features of the new playground is that there actually *is* a sandbox—in fact, an entire “zone of sand.” Sandboxes have disappeared from city-run playgrounds slowly, and many people are unaware that there are only fifty-two left. (In the nineteen-seventies, there were as many as eight hundred.) If the Rockwell model catches on, it may herald the return of sand to New York City playgrounds. And this is likely to mean the return of the question that led to the disappearance in the first place: Are those things clean?

An informal survey of parents and nannies at sandboxes across the city finds that people fall into two categories: those who have never thought about how often the sand is cleaned, and those who think about it frequently and don’t want to know. “People talk about how rats come at night and use it as a litter box,” a woman at Mariner’s Playground, in Central Park, said. “I wash my son’s hands when he comes out.” Another woman recounted a story about friends who found a syringe in a sandbox: “They just packed up and moved out of the city. To Darien, I think.”

Bob Redmond, the director of capital projects for the Manhattan division of the Parks Department, is quick to dispel these fears. Not only are the city’s sandboxes sifted clean regularly, he said, but every year—or at least every other year—every sand pit in the city is shovelled out and replenished. According to Redmond, the most vulnerable sandboxes are those which are hidden from the street. “If sandboxes are not in protected areas, people

run their dogs through them,” he said. “You don’t want kids to take dog waste and put it in their mouths. They put everything in their mouths.” So when the city began refurbishing playgrounds, in the nineteen-eighties, sandboxes were generally phased out.

There were arguments against this measure, Redmond explained. “Psychologists tell us that sand is an important play element because children get to learn that they can ‘shape their world.’ I don’t know what that means, but that’s what they tell us.” He went on, “Years ago, when we didn’t have any money, we’d just go and take new sand from the beach.” Today, the city buys bleached, lead-free, playground-grade sand.

Yet there will always be parents who don’t trust what’s in there. A few years ago, a writer and filmmaker named Peter von Ziegesar wrote an essay for a downtown newspaper which he said was “loosely based on events” surrounding an allegedly filthy sandbox at the Bleecker Street Playground. “It turned out the city, as a matter of policy, did not replace sand in playgrounds,” von Ziegesar wrote. “Sand had been around since the time of the dinosaurs, the thinking went, and would be here long after the West Village had melted into the Hudson River. Rain from the sky would wash the sand in fresh water, sunlight sterilize it, air from New Jersey fluff it dry and ants carry off any crumbs and excess organic matter.”

When Redmond was told of von Ziegesar’s story, he said, “Who the hell is he? He’s not a sandbox expert.” Redmond did a quick records search and confirmed that the sandbox at Bleecker Street was last changed in 2005 and is due to be changed again this spring.

At this point, an inspection of the Bleecker Street sandbox seemed warranted. A visit noted the following debris: two Band-Aids (one a Spider-Man), a plastic cup from Elixir Juice, a sheet of aluminum foil, a crushed water bottle (later stricken from the list after being reclassified as a toy by a small child), many leaves and twigs, and an object that could not be identified but which prompted a cry of “Nicky, no! Don’t put that in your mouth!” from a nearby bench. Over all, the area seemed passably clean, and even getting cleaner, as a pigeon removed from the sand something that may have been a Cheeto.

—Daniel Radosh