

Ideas and Cash for New Play Spaces



CLAIRE SHEPROW

David Rockwell with display of "loose parts."



ROCKWELL GROUP / THE TRIBECA TRIB

Rendering of ship-inspired playground at Burling Slip illustrates children's use of loose objects, with "play associate," at right, helping out.

Partying for the New Playground at Burling Slip

BY ANDREA APPLETON

It may have been the poshest playground party ever held.

The Oct. 25 fundraiser for the playground soon to occupy Burling Slip was held at a "pop-up" restaurant on 57th Street, a former Hard Rock Café turned glitzy gourmet spot. (The restaurant, which belongs to Bon Appétit, was designed by architect David Rockwell and will exist for a total of two weeks.)

Waiters glided by with trays of crab cakes, under the glitter of 1,000 tiny mirrors hanging from the ceiling. In the kitchen, famous chef Emeril Lagasse prepared braised beef short ribs and potato soup with white truffle. The mayor dropped by to say a few words. Guests sipped chilled martinis, largely ignoring

the corner where renderings of the playground and prototypes of the toys that will populate it were displayed.

The design of Imagination Playground, a pro bono project of Rockwell's, is a significant departure from the city's usual model. Meant to evoke a ship, the playground will feature sand and water, as well as a full-time cadre of "play associates," there to ensure safety and encourage creative play. The play workers will also keep an eye on the "loose parts," an assemblage of found objects, commercial toys and Rockwell-designed foam objects.

The design—after a few early modifications, including more transparent fencing and a lowered height—has been approved by the Landmarks Preservation

Commission. Construction will begin this winter, to be completed next fall.

The city's Parks Department will provide routine maintenance, and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) donated \$2 million in supplementary funding. In addition, the Rockwell Group raised \$1.8 million—over a million of which came from real estate mogul Kent Swig—towards a \$2 million endowment fund that will pay for hiring play workers, replacing loose parts and other costs. (The October event raised over \$250,000 for the fund.)

Rockwell's soft foam loose parts—ranging from trapezoids and squares to puzzle-like pieces that fit together—have been tested on kids throughout the city, including a group at Teardrop Park in

Battery Park City. At the fundraiser, a video of kids constructing huge towers with the shapes (as well as hitting each other over the head with foam tubes and running around with cardboard boxes on their heads) played in the corner.

"It's fascinating," Rockwell said, "because it shows kids' creative instincts. After they build their own structure, they look around and see what other kids have built and figure out how to link it."

At the fundraiser, tiny models of the toys decorated each table and the cloth napkins were tied with lengths of miniature jump rope. Following the meal, a silent auction was held. One of the items on the block was a chance to design a playhouse with David Rockwell himself. Estimated value? \$1,500.