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## overview

Imagination Playground is a breakthrough playspace concept designed by U.S. architect David Rockwell to encourage child-directed, unstructured free play - the kind of play that experts say is critical to a child's intellectual, social, physical and emotional development. Comprised of an assortment of loose parts, including foam blocks in uniquely designed shapes, Imagination Playground empowers children to constantly reconfigure the space around them and design their own course of play.

The first site-specific Imagination Playground at Burling Slip opened in July 2010 near South Street Seaport in lower Manhattan. Following the playground's success, Rockwell Group developed Imagination Playground in a Box and Imagination Playground in a Cart, more portable, scalable versions of the playground. These modular, easy-to-install playgrounds provide creative play in almost any indoor or outdoor setting, transforming unused spaces into dynamic play environments. Since 2010, over 800 playgrounds have enlivened public parks, schools, daycare facilities, and children's museums across the globe.

With the hope of transforming lives of children around the world, Imagination Playground continues to explore new directions and initiatives that promote the benefits of free play, discovery, and learning. A recent initiative through UNICEF (P.L.A.Y.) is bringing Imagination Playground in a Box to children throughout Haiti and Bangladesh in spaces where opportunities for recreation are limited. In addition, Imagination Playground continues to develop materials and content for educators and parents about loose parts play; and designed the interactive exhibition on block play, *PLAY WORK BUILD* at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C.

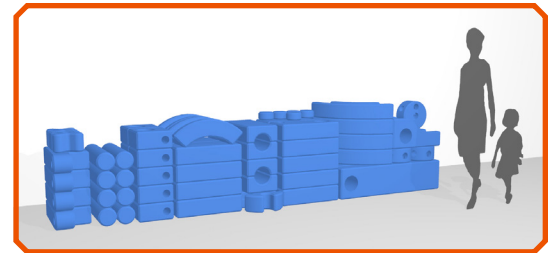
**Imagination Playground is helping to build a community — including parents, educators, caregivers, researchers, and leaders — united by a belief in the importance of creative free play to help our children grow up happy and healthy.**

## overview, continued...

imagination playground is available to you in a variety of ways:

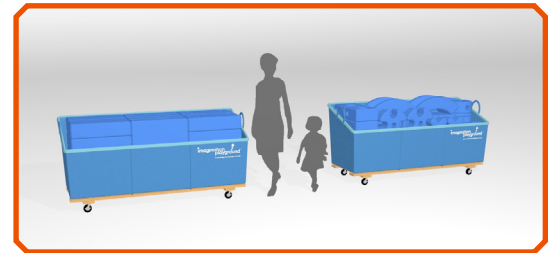
### imagination playground blocks

Imagination Playground Blocks are a set of large, foam parts that allow children to play at an environmental scale. The Classic Block Set consists of 15 uniquely designed shapes to encourage open-ended free play and a wide variety of play patterns. The most recent Add-on Sets offer advanced geometric concepts through angles and curves, increasing the variety and complexity of play with the existing Classic Block Set.



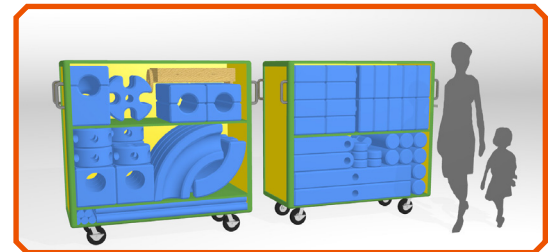
### imagination playground in a cart

A kit of parts suitable for a variety of outdoor and indoor sites. It gives communities an easy-to-install, cost-effective means to offer their children opportunities for unstructured, free play. Includes a full set of Imagination Playground Blocks housed in a storage unit that easily moves through a standard door width for both indoor and outdoor use. This versatile set is an ideal solution for sites that do not need a secured container. A weather-resistant cover for the cart is sold separately.



### imagination playground in a box

Includes Imagination Playground Blocks, secure and rugged container for more exposed environments, a starter kit of loose parts and a storage unit on wheels. Imagination Playground in a Box can be used on its own or as an addition to an existing playspace.



### imagination playground installations

Imagination Playground Installations creates an entirely new indoor experience combining informal play, learning and interactivity. Fully customizable and designed for each organization and company's space and needs, the installations highlight play and informal learning through hands-on block play. The first exhibit, PLAY WORK BUILD, opened in November 2012 at the National Building Museum. This award winning exhibit supports the Museum's mission, transforms galleries, enhances its education programs, and highlights the Museum's collections.





Imagination Playground Burling Slip, Photo Credit: Frank Oudeman



Imagination Playground in a Cart, Photo Credit: Blandon Belushin



Imagination Playground Add-on Sets, Photo Credit: Tom Moore



Let's Move! & Michelle Obama, Image Courtesy of KaBOOM!



PLAY WORK BUILD at the National Building Museum  
Photo Credit: Kevin Allen



UNICEF P.L.A.Y., Photo Credit: ©Marco Dormino



## frequently asked questions

### how is imagination playground different than other playgrounds?

Traditional playgrounds consist primarily of fixed equipment, such as slides, monkey bars and teeter-totters, all of which focus on developing children's gross motor skills. Imagination Playground, on the other hand, is an interactive, transformable environment that prompts children to manipulate their environment and create a playspace of their own with sand, water and loose parts. Imagination Playground addresses a broader spectrum of play needs through opportunities for fantasy play and socio-cooperative play, in addition to more traditional running, jumping and climbing. Kids need to be active on many levels, and they need to exercise their minds as well as their muscles. Research shows that children at the age of eight who have experienced varied and challenging play are considerably better prepared to benefit from ongoing formal education. Imagination Playground can be used by itself, or in conjunction with traditional playground equipment.

### what are the different versions of imagination playground?

To learn more about our products – Imagination Playground in a Box, Imagination Playground in a Cart and Imagination Playground Blocks – please visit [www.imaginationplayground.org/products](http://www.imaginationplayground.org/products).

### where can i go to experience imagination playground?

The flagship Imagination Playground Park opened to the public in July 2010 at Burling Slip in the South Street Seaport area of New York City, a collaboration between Rockwell Group and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. The second-site specific Imagination Playground will open in Brooklyn's Betsy Head Park in 2015. There are also Imagination Playground sets popping up across the globe, from Chicago to London to Sao Paulo. To find the one nearest you, email [contactus@imaginationplayground.org](mailto:contactus@imaginationplayground.org).

### how much does an imagination playground cost?

The price of Imagination Playground ranges depending on what version you purchase. Please contact Imagination Playground at 1-678-60407466 or [contactus@imaginationplayground.org](mailto:contactus@imaginationplayground.org) for more information on the different design and pricing options.

### what are the imagination playground blocks made of?

Imagination Playground Blocks are made of a cross-linked polyethylene foam. The closed-cell foam is soft, lightweight, waterproof, and recyclable. It is resistant to sun, heat, mold, mildew, corrosion, and micro-organisms. These highly-durable blocks can be transported to a landfill or returned to the manufacturer to be recycled when they are no longer wanted on the playground.



## frequently asked questions, continued...

### are the imagination playground blocks safe?

Imagination Playground Blocks are non-toxic and resistant to germs, mold and mildew. They are sturdy enough to withstand the elements and soft enough to for children to play with safely. The particular type of molecular linking used to bond the foam ensures that when exposed to an open fire the blue blocks will smolder, but not catch fire. All products meet American Society for Testing Materials (ASTM) and U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission (CFSC) standards.

### how can the imagination playground blocks be cleaned?

The blue blocks can be cleaned easily with a scrub brush, soap and water.

### are the imagination playground blocks environmentally friendly?

Yes, incorporating breakthrough technologies, these highly durable parts can be recycled if desired; please contact Imagination Playground for more details.

### can you clarify the role of a play associate?

Play Associates are an integral part of the Imagination Playground concept and are responsible for the management and maintenance of the play space, as well as the facilitation of children's play. Play Associates do not direct play or teach children how to use the objects or environment. They might sometimes quietly demonstrate a different use of materials but there is no educational agenda or schedule of recreation programs. What children do will be the result of their inherent curiosity and urge to play. Play Associates will enable children to play in ways that would not be possible without a trained staff to monitor the resources.

### how do you become a play associate?

For all Imagination Playground sets, Play Associate training is part of the purchase price. The training provides an overview of the Imagination Playground concept, the development of loose parts play, current research in child development, as well as some tips and tools to help Play Associates facilitate creative play on a daily basis. The training is offered online in a convenient on-demand format. Email [contactus@imaginationplayground.org](mailto:contactus@imaginationplayground.org) for more details.

At Imagination Playground at Burling Slip, Play Associates are employees of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. The Parks Department has a summer program that deploys Play Associates to sites all around New York City, and they will use Imagination Playground at Burling Slip for training all year round.

## frequently asked questions, continued...

### must all sites that obtain imagination playground have play associates?

Imagination Playground products have been created as sets of parts intended to be used with a Play Associate. Imagination Playground has developed a curriculum that will train these workers to properly implement Imagination Playground products. We require all Play Associates to receive this training prior to taking charge of the Imagination Playground site.

### how many children are suggested for each imagination playground set?

We recommend that while adult-child ratios should be determined by policy at the site, at least one adult per twenty children, ages 5-12. A lower adult-child ratio should be maintained when children are younger than five.

### can I get the imagination playground blocks in different colors?

Imagination Playground Blocks only come in one color in order to facilitate more imaginative play, without any distraction or competition that might arise from having multi-colored toys.

### what role does KaBOOM! and rockwell group have in imagination playground?

Rockwell Group serves as the creative force behind the concept, while KaBOOM! is the exclusive not-for-profit North American distributor.

### how can I stay in touch with imagination playground?

The Imagination Playground community can be found at:



[ImaginationPlayground](#)



[ImgPlayground](#)



[ImgPlayground](#)



[Community.imaginationplayground](#)

## our family

### rockwell group

Rockwell Group is an award winning, cross-disciplinary 140-person architecture and design firm based in New York, with satellite offices in Madrid and Shanghai. Inspired by theater, technology and high-end craft, the firm creates memorable environments for each project, including cultural, hospitality, retail, product, and set design.

Projects include: The Walt Disney Family Museum; The Children's Hospital at Montefiore; *PLAY WORK BUILD* at National Building Museum; The Blue School; the future National Center for Civil and Human Rights; Culture Shed at Hudson Yards; W Hotels in New York, Paris, Vieques, and Singapore; Nobu restaurants worldwide, JetBlue Terminal 5 at JFK Airport; and set design for the 2009 and 2010 Academy Awards and Broadway.

Visit: [www.rockwellgroup.com](http://www.rockwellgroup.com)



David Rockwell at UK Launch of Imagination Playground  
Photo Credit: Susan Smart

### KaBOOM!

KaBOOM! is the national non-profit dedicated to giving kids the childhood they deserve by bringing play to those who need it most. Children today spend less time playing outdoors than any previous generation, a fact that is having disastrous consequences on their health, achievement levels, and overall well-being. Social entrepreneur Darell Hammond founded non-profit KaBOOM! in 1996 with a vision of creating a great place to play within walking distance of every child in America because children need to play actively every day at home, in school and in their communities. An early advocate and partner in the launch of Imagination Playground, KaBOOM! is now the exclusive not-for-profit distributor of Imagination Playground throughout North America.

Through KaBOOM! and local area Children's Museums, Imagination Playground has also partnered to bring block play to Let's Move! nationwide. Visit: [www.kaboom.org](http://www.kaboom.org)



2012 White House Easter Egg Roll  
Image Courtesy of KaBOOM!

### new york city department of parks and recreation

The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYCDPR) is New York City's principal provider of recreational and athletic facilities and programs, operating more than 800 athletic fields and nearly 1,000 playgrounds. NYCDPR partnered with Rockwell Group in realizing the site specific Imagination Playground at Burling Slip, and it continues support through programs that bring Imagination Playground in a Box to communities throughout the NYC region. Rockwell Group and NYCDPR recently unveiled the designs of the first permanent Imagination Playground play space in Brooklyn's Betsy Head Park. The second site-specific Imagination Playground is set to open in 2015. Visit: [www.nyc.gov/parks](http://www.nyc.gov/parks)



Imagination Playground Burling Slip  
Photo Credit: Frank Oudeman



## our family, continued...

### **national building museum, washington d.c.**

National Building Museum and Imagination Playground partnered to open *PLAY WORK BUILD* in November 2012. The interactive exhibition combines the Museum's Architectural Toy Collection with hands-on block play. On display through 2014, the family-friendly exhibition invites visitors of all ages to nurture their inner architect skills through Rockwell Group's specially designed Imagination Playground installation and original digital interactive. Visit: [www.nbm.org](http://www.nbm.org)



**National Building Museum's exhibition PLAY WORK BUILD**  
Photo Credit: Kevin Allen

### **unicef**

UNICEF P.L.A.Y. (Play & Learning Activities for Youth) explores the power of play as a tool for learning and emotional development in countries where safe recreation opportunities are limited. Through a grant from Disney, UNICEF launched the pilot program which utilizes playgrounds and recreation as a critical part of child development. The initiative brings 30 Imagination Playground in a Box sets, reaching more than 10,000 children in primary schools and child-friendly spaces across Haiti and Bangladesh. To learn more, watch the inspiring video via [youtu.be/Wtj3AoA1RDg](http://youtu.be/Wtj3AoA1RDg)



**UNICEF P.L.A.Y.**  
Photo Credit: Marco Domino

### **association of children's museums**

Begun in 1962, the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) is a professional member service organization for the children's museum field. ACM is the only organization representing museums and professionals dedicated to early childhood play, the starting point in the continuum of lifelong learning. Imagination Playground is a proud member of the Association of Children's Museums. Visit: [www.childrensmuseums.org](http://www.childrensmuseums.org)



**Places to Play, Louisiana Children's Museum**  
Image Courtesy of Imagination Playground

### **national association for the education of young children**

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is the world's largest organization working on behalf of young children. Founded in 1926, NAEYC has led the way toward excellence in high-quality early care and education. Imagination Playground is a proud member of The National Association for the Education of Young Children. Visit: [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)



**NAEYC Conference 2012**  
Image Courtesy of Imagination Playground

## our friends

### **alliance for childhood**

The Alliance for Childhood promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living. The Alliance is currently working to restore play to all children, both in school and out-of-school.

Visit: [www.allianceforchildhood.org](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org)

### **children's environments research group**

The Children's Environments Research Group (CERG), links university scholarship with the development of policies, environments and programs to fulfill children's rights and improve the quality of their lives.

Visit: [web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cerg/index.html](http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cerg/index.html)

### **head start body start**

Head Start Body Start National Center for Physical Development and Outdoor Play (HSBS) is a collaboration between the American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR) and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), and is funded by a grant from the Administration for Children and Families. Imagination Playground has been selected as one of 28 play space-related resources for inclusion in its 2011 HSBS Preferred Vendor Catalog.

Visit: [www.headstartbodystart.org](http://www.headstartbodystart.org)

### **Let's Move!**

Let's Move! is a comprehensive initiative, launched by First Lady Michelle Obama, dedicated to solving the problem of obesity within a generation, so that children born today will grow up healthier and able to pursue their dreams.

[www.letsmove.gov](http://www.letsmove.gov)

### **new york coalition for play**

The New York Coalition for Play is a partnership of organizations and individuals committed to improving opportunities for freely chosen, unstructured, and child-directed play in the New York metropolitan area. NYCPlay works to preserve and enhance the birthright of all children to have time and space for play through the activities of its partners and programs.

Visit: [www.nycplay.org](http://www.nycplay.org)

### **play direct uk.com**

Play Direct UK.com offers outdoor learning and school grounds equipment to make playtime more active, challenging and above all fun.

Visit: [www.playdirectuk.com](http://www.playdirectuk.com)

### **videatives**

Videatives implements its mission to make children's thinking visible through the use of text with supporting short video clips that can be downloaded or streamed from the internet.

Visit: [www.videatives.com](http://www.videatives.com)

## press



New York Post, April 23, 2013  
*Rich Calder, Design for tree house-inspired 'Imagination Playground' unveiled for Brownsville*



TimeOut New York Kids, April 23, 2013  
*Lee, Magill, New Imagination Playground to open at Brooklyn's Betsy Head Park*



Slate, January 29, 2013  
*Nicholas Day, "Tear Down The Swing Sets"*



The Washington Post, December 11, 2012  
*'Play Work Build' puts creativity on exhibit at the National Building Museum*



Fast Company Co.DESIGN, November 29, 2012  
*An Interactive Exhibit Chronicles The History of Building Blocks*



DC Curbed, November 21, 2012  
*Amy Rose Dobson, "David Rockwell Discusses PLAY WORK BUILD At The Building Museum"*



USA Today, November 17, 2012  
*Yagana Shah, "Exhibit on blocks makes for creative playtime"*



Architect Magazine, September 2012  
*"Spontaneous Interventions"*



Core77, August 20, 2012  
*"Venice Architecture Biennale Preview: Spontaneous Interventions at the U.S. Pavilion"*



FreeLounge Magazine, July 2012  
*"Anywhere: Building and Playing"*



Süddeutsche Zeitung, June 2, 2012  
*"Play, Tussle, Fall!"*



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*"Imagination Playground: Design Als Spiel-Spass"*



DETAIL, May 10, 2012  
*"Playspaces - Imaginative and Immersive Environments"*



Junior, February 2012  
*Helen McKay-Ferguson, "Blocks, Knocks & Play That Rocks"*



Icon, August, 2011  
George Pendle, "Object Lesson"



Domus China, Issue 051  
*Wan Liang "Imagination Playground"*



TimeOut New York Kids, November, 2010  
*"Best Non-Beach Spot to Get Sand in your Shoes"*



Landscape Architecture, November, 2010  
*Daniel Jost, "New York Loosens Up"*



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*Johanna Agerman Ross, "A Playground"*



The New York Times, September 26, 2010  
*David Rockwell, "Op-Chart: Unpacking Imagination"*



Design Week, September 9, 2010  
*Dominic Lutyens, "Playing Fare"*



CNN, September 2, 2010  
*Jessica Yellin, "Build-It-Yourself Playground Helps Kids Imagine"*



Interior Design, September, 2010  
*Nicholas Tamarin, "Centerfold"*



WPIX Morning News, August 17, 2010  
*Kids Let Their Imaginations Grow At The Imagination Playground!*



Time, August 9, 2010  
*Harriet Barovick, "Building a Better Playground"*



Time Out New York Kids, August 2010  
*Tom Roston, "David Rockwell's Innovative Play Spot Opens to New York Families"*



CBS, July 31, 2010  
*CBS Sunday Morning*



Wall Street Journal, July 29, 2010  
*Ralph Gardner, "Making Work of Child's Play"*
































NPR, July 27, 2010  
*Robert Smith, "All Things Considered: The New Economics of Fancy Playgrounds"*



NBC, July 27, 2010  
*NY Nightly News*

press, continued...

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|---|---|---|--|
|    | Fox 5 New York, July 27, 2010<br><i>Good Day New York</i>   |    | Daily News, July 15th, 2008<br><i>Imagination Playground opens in Brownsville</i>                                  |
|    | The New York Times, July 26, 2010<br><i>Corey Kilgannon, "A Newfangled Sandbox Arrives (Check Out the Canals)"</i>          |    | New York Times, July 14th, 2008<br><i>A Playground Where Creativity Can Run Wild</i>                               |
|    | The Leonard Lopate Show, July 12th, 2010<br><i>The Way We Play: Modern Playground Design</i>                                |    | Thirteen/WNET, June 1st, 2008<br><i>Interview with David Rockwell</i>  |
|     | The New Yorker, July 5, 2010<br><i>Rebecca Mead, "State of Play: How Tot Lots Became Places to Build Children's Brains"</i> |    | CNBC, May 27th, 2008<br><i>Playgrounds Offer Imaginative Sponsorship Opportunity</i>                               |
|     | Parents, July, 2010<br><i>Susan Gregory Thomas, "Let them Play!"</i>  |    | CBS, May 20th, 2008<br><i>CBS Sunday Morning Video</i>   |
|    | The New York Observer, June, 2010<br><i>Wendy Straker Hauser, "The Future is Now"</i>                                       |    | New York Times, May 4th, 2008<br><i>An Invitation to Child's Play: Big Blocks and Wheelbarrows</i>                 |
|   | New York Magazine, May 31, 2010<br><i>The Best Bet</i>  |  | Charlie Rose, May 24th, 2007<br><i>A conversation with David Rockwell</i>  |
|  | New York Times Style Magazine, Winter 2009<br><i>Jill Singer, "Remix: King of the Playground"</i>                           |  | Boston Globe, April 15th, 2007<br><i>Back To The Playground</i>  |
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|  | Stanford Social Innovation Review, Fall 2009<br><i>Putting More Fun Into Play</i>   |  | The New Yorker, January 29th, 2007<br><i>Comeback: Sand Men</i>  |
|  | Fast Company, March, 2009<br><i>David Rockwell's Imagination Playground</i>   |  | ABC News, January 11th, 2007<br><i>New-Age Playgrounds Rule, as Long as the Kids Are in Charge</i>                 |
|   | Time, January 28th, 2009<br><i>The New Playground: Bye, Jungle Gym</i>  |  | New York Times, January 11th, 2007<br><i>New York City's Future Playground Gets a Nod From Present-Day Players</i> |
|  | Good Magazine, September / October, 2008<br><i>Loose Parts Playgrounds</i>  |  | New York Times, January 10th, 2007<br><i>New York Tries to Think Outside the Sandbox</i>                           |
|  | Wall Street Journal, August 5th, 2008<br><i>The Architect-Designer Focuses on Child's Play</i>                              |  | Tribeca Trib, January 10th, 2007<br><i>A 'Reinvented' Playground for Seaport</i>                                   |
|  | NY1, August 4th, 2008<br><i>Where To Go: Imagination Playground In A Box</i>  |  | Downtown Express, August 11–17, 2006<br><i>City looks to Fulton and beyond in East Side plan</i>                   |
|  | 4 NBC News, July 31st, 2008<br><i>Portable Playgrounds Developed For Kids</i>   |   |  |

## New Imagination Playground to open at Brooklyn's Betsy Head Park

*Brooklyn's first-ever Imagination Playground will be constructed in Brownsville's Betsy Head Playground starting in spring 2014 and should open in spring 2015.*

By Lee Magill



### Imagination Playground at Brooklyn's Betsy Head Park

Rockwell Group rendering of the Imagination Playground at Brownsville, Brooklyn's Betsy Head Park. The second-ever permanent Imagination Playground in the world will be built in Brownsville, Brooklyn's Betsy Head Park (the first is in the Financial District; it opened in 2010) starting in spring 2014, and David Rockwell has just unveiled his new, tree house–inspired design for it. (Rockwell's design was done pro bono, and he is donating a set of his signature blue blocks to the park as well.) The project will take the shape of a multilevel area with sand, water and loose parts (the blocks) that kids can turn into whatever they please in unstructured play. A ramp will weave through trees, past permanent play equipment and basketball and handball courts. There's even an exercise area planned for adults. The playground is slated to open sometime in spring 2015. Click through our slide show of the Rockwell Group's renderings to see how much there is to look forward to. And since it's not open yet, check out our list of the city's 25 best playgrounds (see where the first Imagination Playground ranked!) and make a plan to soak up the warmer weather that's sure to come our way.

## Tear Down the Swing Sets

And the plastic forts. Here's how to put the *play* back in playgrounds.

By Nicholas Day | Posted Monday, Jan. 28, 2013, at 3:28 PM ET



In 1888, the psychologist Stanley Hall published a story about a sand pile. A minor classic, it describes how a group of children created a world out of a single load of sand. These children were diligent, they were imaginative, they were remarkably adult.

More than a century later, at the architect David Rockwell's Imagination Playground in lower Manhattan, small humans scurry back and forth all day long, carrying Rockwell's oversized blue foam blocks from self-devised task to self-devised task. These children are intent, they are cooperative, they are resourceful. The scene resembles nothing so much as Stanley Hall's sand pile—with each grain of sand much bigger and much bluer. (Except for the bits of actual sand, that is.)

More than any playground in recent memory, the Imagination Playground has inspired an outburst of excitement. It's a hit with the hip parents who take their kids to Dan Zanes concerts, and is just as crowded as one. But it also represents something much more mundane: the triumph of loose parts. After a century of creating playgrounds for children, of drilling swing sets and plastic forts into the ground, we have come back to children creating their own playgrounds. Loose parts—sand, water, blocks—are having a moment.

The resurgence of loose parts is an attempt to put the *play* back in playgrounds. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of exuberant playground design, culminating in the great Richard Dattner adventure playgrounds in New York City. Then the grownups got skittish. Down came the merry-go-rounds and the jungle gyms, and in their place, a landscape of legally-insulated, brightly-colored, spongy-floored, hard-plastic structures took root. Today, walking onto a children's playground is like exiting the interstate: Regardless of where you are, you see the exact same thing.

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A lot of people agree that playgrounds are now too boring, and for years there's been talk about how we should make them more challenging, more risky. But so far, that talk hasn't turned into more interesting playgrounds. The most adventurous playgrounds tend to be singular projects, often built through fundraising, for the rich. (A genuine exception is this amazing project in Philadelphia.) "People talk about making playgrounds more risky," says Susan Solomon, the author of *American Playgrounds*, which charts their demise. "But there's this sense that if you talk about it, that's enough. There's this very real reluctance to get involved in anything that might at least potentially cause an injury."

In Europe, the assumptions are radically different. Even the head of play safety at England's Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents—a man whom you'd assume would be paranoid about preventing *all* accidents—has said that "children should be exposed to a certain degree of risk, not because an activity is risky per se but because it is fun, exciting, and challenging."

As the psychologist Ellen Sandseter has pointed out, the American attitude is a fundamental miscalculation of the risks: Kids who are bored stay inside and staying inside is ultimately far worse for your health than a broken arm. Talk about why we can't have nice playgrounds here typically begins and ends with lawsuits. But potential legal action is too easy an excuse for not rethinking playgrounds, says Darrell Hammond, head of the play-promoting nonprofit KaBOOM!.

Change "requires all of us doing something different, not just a few law changes." In short, it requires all of us to be a little less panicked, and honestly, that's probably too much to ask, at least in the short term. Which is why loose parts may be the best hope for the future of playgrounds right now.

Rodwell's playground is still an adventure playground—a construction site with all the splintery edges sanded down. It's what an adventure playground looks like in a risk-averse culture. And it promotes the kind of play we think children should be doing now: not with just their bodies, but with their minds. The Imagination Playground is a much more cognitive vision of the playground. No one would confuse it with a jungle gym.

Rodwell himself is well-aware of this. At the adventure playgrounds of decades past, he says, "they did things much more dangerous than you could get away with today in a litigious society—working with hammers and nails and actually building things." (These types of playgrounds do still exist in the United States, but barely.) So instead of physical risk, Rodwell talks about creative risk. At the Imagination Playground, you can dare to build whatever you want—knowing that tomorrow it will be gone. "Part of the impact of the playground is that it is impermanent," he says. The rise of the loose parts playground extends well beyond lower Manhattan. In various versions, there are more than 1,000 sets of Rodwell's blocks out there, and thanks in part to a partnership with KaBOOM!, a lot of those blocks are far from the tax brackets of the South Street Seaport. When I talked to KaBOOM!'s Hammond, he'd just come back from Miami, where the bright-blue blocks are in a low-income child care center.

Of course, loose parts don't have to be designed by David Rodwell—they can be junk from your basement. Detroit's Arts & Scraps is a loose parts-focused organization where the loose parts are, well, scraps. Early childhood educators, for their part, adore loose parts for the open-ended, spontaneous sort of play they encourage, which is very much in line with the new orthodoxy of how young children learn. "When you have loose parts, you don't have the same repetitive pattern of play," Hammond says. "It's much a more circuitous path." And that's what you want from play. "You want to see kids escape into this zone in which they lose themselves." In other words, loose parts are perfectly suited to assuage the paradoxical parental anxieties of the moment: We want our children to have time to play but we also want that play to be *productive*—to be more than play.

Of course, loose parts playgrounds are messier than plasticized fort structures. At the Imagination Playground, there are "play associates" present, partly to tell the parents to sit down, partly to "facilitate play," in their words, but also

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to put out the props and then put them away again. (Playworkers are much more common in England; they're almost unknown here.) Loose parts require more oversight than a slide. They can walk away.

In New York, however, they haven't. Until recently, the city spent a lot of time trying to vandal-proof playgrounds, says Nancy Barthold, assistant commissioner for recreation and programming for New York City's Parks Department. Now the city distributes loose parts around the boroughs in the summer: some sets of Rockwell's blocks, some hoses, some buckets and cloth, even makeshift sandboxes. Those loose parts stayed loose; they didn't walk away. "We thought that things were going to get destroyed and stolen and they're not," Barthold says. "It's nice to be able to go back to being able to offer children things that move around and to do it without too much worry."

And in the end, the blocks might not even be the most important loose parts. "Kids are drawn to sand and water," Barthold says. "Beyond the blocks, the basics are simply sand and water."

Stanley Hall's sand pile, it turns out, isn't a portrait of the past. It's a vision of the future.



## ‘Play Work Build’ puts creativity on exhibit at the National Building Museum

By Christina Barron, Published: December 11



If you're a fan of building blocks, you probably have a set that makes a castle, a fighter plane or a hospital. There are step-by-step directions to get to the finished product. But what if the blocks came with no directions and no theme? What would you make?

If you're curious, head to the National Building Museum. The museum's "Play Work Build" exhibition is filled with hundreds of bright blue blocks made from a dense foam. There are little blocks to build on a table, and big blocks to stack several feet up from the floor. There are even virtual blocks. All you need to bring is your imagination, and you can build anything.

The blocks, which include arches, bends, hinges and a round shape called "little cheese," have inspired kids to make a huge range of creations.

"I would like to build forts," said Alex Rosenbaum, 10, who with his parents and brother Jacob was on his second visit to "Play Work Build." Alex said he preferred the large blocks and would recommend the exhibition to any kid who likes to build.

"I could stay here for hours," he said as he and Jacob, 7, began to construct a square fort that grew to four feet tall.

Their fort got the attention of younger builders nearby who were interested in helping.



The ideas of starting from scratch and working together is just what New York-based designer David Rockwell had in mind when he created the blue blocks.

Rockwell, who has two kids, came up with the idea of creating a playground in Lower Manhattan, the area of New York City damaged in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

“Most of the playgrounds in the city . . . didn’t encourage the taking apart and putting together,” Rockwell said.

So Rockwell and his design group dreamed up a set of blocks that come on a cart and could be used inside or outside. They tested it at a New York recreation center.

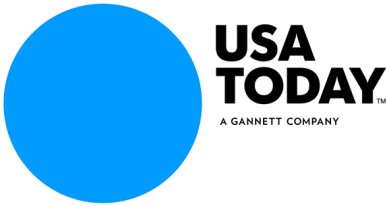
“What we discovered is [that] kids would play more with that set of blocks than with anything,” Rockwell said, “because every day they could build something new.”

The sets, called Imagination Playground, can be found at 600 playgrounds worldwide, including Washington’s Two Rivers Public Charter School and the Beauvoir School.

When the National Building Museum’s curators were looking for something kid-friendly to replace the popular “Lego Architecture” exhibition, they went to Rockwell. His company donated the playground-size blocks and created smaller ones especially for the museum. Rockwell also designed a huge screen that fills with falling virtual blocks. If you stand on a special mat in front of the screen, cameras capture your shape and it appears onscreen. Virtual blocks then magically fill that shape and continue stacking up to the ceiling.

Isabella Valles, 9, of Columbia said her favorite part of the virtual blocks wasn’t watching them rise in a stack. It was what happened when she moved around on the mat.

“It was fun to make them fall down.”



## Exhibit on blocks makes for creative playtime

By Yagana Shah

*Parents and children may want to consider putting down the video games and picking up the building blocks. A new exhibit on playing with blocks has opened in Washington, D.C.*



**10:10AM EST November 17, 2012**

WASHINGTON — Parents and children may want to consider putting down the video games and picking up the building blocks. A new exhibit on playing with blocks titled "Play Work Build" opening at the National Building Museum Sunday is shedding light on the history and evolution of block play.

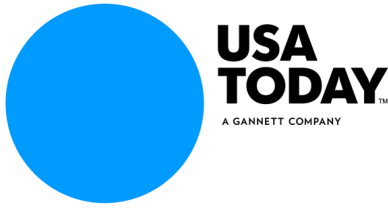
The exhibit, designed in collaboration with the Rockwell Group, a Manhattan-based design firm, is putting a modern spin on the age-old tradition of block play using the "Imagination Playground."

The playground is a play space concept designed by Rockwell Group CEO David Rockwell that encourages free and creative play through the use of loose foam parts.

"When we first started, we just wanted to make a creative playground. But then we realized block play has a lot of benefits," says Barry Richards, principal at the Rockwell Group. "It involves cognitive development for children; it involves learning; it involves social development where they work together. So it's collaborative, social, emotional and physical." Children and adults of all ages can immerse themselves in building and creating structures with thousands of bright blue foam blocks of all shapes and sizes, and by interacting with a digital block wall.

Visitors can travel through the history of block play with the 38 sets of blocks and building systems on display, dating back as far as the 1860s, including the original Froebel blocks, to present-day Legos. Tinker Toys, alphabet blocks, Lincoln Logs and Erector sets are all on display to show the longevity of block play while also letting users explore the different tactile ways to play, says curator Sarah Leavitt.

The variety of sets exhibit the many different learning capabilities of block play, including mathematics and proportions. "You can tell a kid a math concept, but they won't grasp it until they literally are grasping it," Leavitt



says. Children are encouraged to guess how many blocks it would take to build different structures from something as small as an igloo to as large as a skyscraper.

Originally developed in the 2010 redesign of a New York City playground, Imagination Playground has found its way into schools, museums, day-care centers and cities across the world. The Bay Area Discovery Museum in the San Francisco Bay Area as well as the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York have housed the Imagination Playground, along with more than 600 sites worldwide.

Richards says parents and teachers are eager to improve the lives of children and support anything that can promote their development while keeping them engaged. Educator Kathleen Kennedy of the Two Rivers Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., says one of the most beneficial aspects of block play is problem solving. "There are no steps here. ... When you're playing a computer game, there's an answer, but with blocks you have to figure it out as you go along," Kennedy says.

Austin-based pediatrician Ari Brown, stresses the versatility of free play and developmental benefits of blocks. "You can do a whole lot of things with blocks. They come in different sizes, so you can sequence them, and colors, so you can group them," Brown says. These analytical skills carry on and help children accomplish much larger tasks as they grow older. While technology certainly has its place in play and learning, Brown says the tactile element immediate feedback children get from free play is irreplaceable. "There are several things you can reflect on a screen, but nothing is going to be able to replace a kid with two blocks in his hands."

U.S. Pavilion, 13th International  
Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale

# ARCHITECT

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

Spontaneous Interventions

c. 7500 BC  
First city in the world







## Rockwell Group

# Imagination Playground

New York City and elsewhere

since 2009

When architect David Rockwell, AIA, started spending time in playgrounds with his young children, he was disturbed by the lack of imagination and variation in the way kids interact with standardized playground equipment. He spent five years developing the Imagination Playground, seeking private-public partnerships to see it realized. Inspired by Froebel blocks and adventure playgrounds, the Imagination Playground features a wide range of elements that allows children to create their own environments and their own course of play. Since the first Imagination Playground opened in Manhattan (with the support of several city agencies), Rockwell has developed a more portable, scalable version—packed into a cart or box—that can quickly **transform small, unused spaces into dynamic playgrounds**. It has been deployed in hundreds of locations worldwide, including Haiti and Bangladesh.

	accessibility, community, pleasure
	0 for design + 5,000 for cart version + 7 million for land and construction
	8 months
	5-8 research and design
	Problem – need for engaging play spaces for children around the globe
	Solution – mobile, accessible, engaging playground

1967 Portland Building completed, first major example of postmodern architecture. 1989 Congress establishes National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing. 1990

by Mark Shepard • **NOTES ON MINOR URBANISM** Consider the contemporary form of urban mobility known as *parkour*. Practitioners of *parkour*, known as *traceurs*, appropriate the space of the city as a platform for exercising gymnastic skill. The city becomes an obstacle course through which one moves from point A to point B as quickly as possible. Understood not as a competitive sport but as a form of physical and mental training, *parkour* helps one develop a spatial awareness of specific affordances of urban structures and the ability to overcome mental and physical obstacles with speed and efficiency. In the *traceur*, we see refracted

a lineage of alternative ways of moving through the city. From Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* to the Situationists' *dérivistes*, these urban actors perform the city in ways that not so much reflect it (as representation) but enact it (through transduction). Though their movement, we can read a city and the possibilities that it offers as well as the socio-spatial relations found there. In this context, *parkour* becomes a form of urban hacking, a way of appropriating architecture and its attendant fittings for purposes neither sanctioned nor anticipated by the original design. Architecture becomes an obstacle that must be overcome as quickly and efficiently as possible, albeit with poise and grace. • Now consider the spatial topology described in *The Catalogue* (2004), a video by British artist Chris Oakley, which shows a shopping mall somewhere in the north of England from the point of view of a surveillance system. We soon see that the system is doing more than just watching. Shoppers are tagged, tracked, and monitored as they go about their routines. Transaction histories are mined, personal inventories are matched against products for sale, and recommendations are made. Prescriptions for eyeglasses are facilitated through the retrieval of a recent eye exam report. The purchase and consumption of food and beverage items at a conveyor sushi bar is matched against a person's medical records and a health prognosis is made based on what he or she is eating. (Fortunately for the subjects

„Der Körper ist nicht  
ein Objekt, das  
man berührt. Er ist  
ein Subjekt, das  
berührt wird.“  
— Friedrich Schlegel



# Spielt! Rauft! Fallt!

Viele glauben, dass auf  
Kinderspielflächen zu viele  
Gefahren lauern. Falsch.  
Sie wurden einst gerade zur  
Kontrolle der Kinder erfunden.

Von Palm Steinhilber

Wahrscheinlich ist es  
schon passiert: Ein  
Kinderspielfeld, das  
aus Kunststoff ist,  
wird von einem  
Kind mit einem  
steinernen Gegenstand  
beschädigt. Die  
Eltern sind entsetzt,  
weil das Kind  
mit einem Stein  
auf dem Spielplatz  
gewalttätig war.  
Doch ist das Kind  
nicht böse, sondern  
einfach nur ein  
Kind, das spielen  
will. Und spielen  
heißt auch mal  
raufen, fallen und  
kriechen.

## Mit Filmen beschäftigen sich Kinder Kunstwerke entdecken.

Die meisten Kinder, die  
mit einem Film  
beschäftigt sind,  
sind nicht nur  
Zuschauer, sondern  
auch Teilnehmer.  
Sie identifizieren  
sich mit den  
Figuren, erleben  
ihre Abenteuer  
mit und haben  
eigene Reaktionen.  
Das ist die  
Kraft der  
Kunst, sie  
verbindet  
Menschen  
über  
Grenzen  
hinweg.

Kinderspielflächen  
sind oft als  
Kontrollinstrument  
entworfen worden.  
Man wollte  
die Kinder  
vor Gefahren  
schützen, die  
in der Natur  
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© Getty Images / Alamy

### Die unsäglichen Gefahren der großen Matschepampe

Zacken – sind scharf. Sie verletzen Kinderhände, die langfristige Schäden verursachen. Wegen dieser Gefahr sind Kinder vor dem Wild das Fahren gelassen, man spricht sie mit Chemie ein. Ist die Gefahr dieser Betonnen Alternativen möglich, was eine Risikoabwägung initiativ abendlicher Anzeichen.

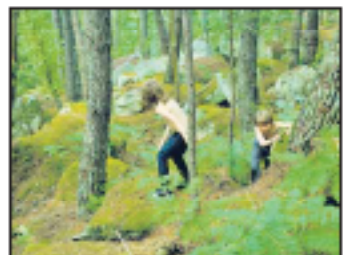
Rutschschachalackwippe – sind an sich gefährlich, da Kinder anfallen, sich entziehen, einen Balken auf dem Kopf bekommen können. Die Tendenz geht zum Glimmen sämtlicher Bodenbeläge oder Komplexitäts der Gefahr. Da drückt sich die Gefahr: andere Kinder auf demselben Spielplatz.

Sonne – ist aber auch lebensgefährlich. Deshalb werden Kinder inwischen in Gießregenschirmen eingepackt. Früher hat man mitags Gießt.

Druck – ist nicht nur potenziell tödlich. Obwohl es Kinderzettel gibt, die nach die alle Regel kennen: Sieben Mio Druck im Jahr haben das Kind gesund.

Strenger Dangel oder Der Fremde – ist tödlich, unvorstellbar. Doch haben nicht die Fälle zugenommen, sondern die mediale Verbreitung und damit vor allem die Angst davor.

Ratgeber – stellen eine Individuelle, aber keine Gefahrquelle dar, da sie sich oft nicht widersprechen und dabei einen ausschließlichen Wahrheitsanspruch vertreten. So ist der alte Kriegswitzchen fallen Spiel (Kind will es am besten) und Lernspiel (Gern wissen es am besten). Spielplatz nach diversen Debatten und nachherigen unentschieden, ist



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## *KULTUR BLOG*

BERND SKUPIN

### *11. IMAGINATION PLAYGROUND: DESIGN*

*MAI 2012 ALS SPIEL-SPAS*



© Frank Oudeman

Wer sagt eigentlich, dass Architektur nicht auch Show, Spaß – und Spiel sein kann. Wie schön es sich architektonisch spielen lässt, zeigt die Rockwell Group jetzt in München. Und bald auch in Berlin, Potsdam, London, Venedig und Helsinki.





US-Architekt David Rockwell und seine Rockwell Group richteten schon Räume und Ambiente für kulturelle Institutionen, Hotels und Restaurants weltweit ein. Sogar das Bühnenbild für die Oscar-Verleihung 2010 in Los Angeles inszenierte er. Immer spektakulär, immer mit Sinn für Phantasie und Effekt aber auch für innovative und überraschende Konzepte – und oft auch mit Humor und spielerischer Eleganz. Dieses spielerische Element kommt jetzt auch zum Tragen, wenn Rockwell morgen parallel zu einer Ausstellung über seine Arbeit in der Architekturgalerie München ganz in der Nähe, vor der Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film HFF, für einen Tag seinen Imagination Playground aufbaut – ein Design-Spielplatz der besonderen Art. Imagination Playground ist ein modularer Spielplatz, der aus einzelnen, beweglichen Elementen besteht und der, veränderbar wie er ist, Kinder ein selbstgesteuertes, freies Spielen ermöglichen soll. In seiner Heimatstadt New York testete er das Konzept bereits erfolgreich.



Rockwell dazu: "Die Idee hinter Imagination Playground war, ein flexibles Umfeld zu gestalten, das Kinder dazu anregt, ihre ganze Kreativität zu entfalten und ihre Fantasie schöpferisch einzusetzen. Wir möchten diese Erfahrung des freien Spiels mit so vielen Kindern wie möglich in der ganzen Welt teilen und dabei zu einem fortschrittlichen Dialog darüber beitragen, wie ein Spielplatz aussehen kann."



Angeregt durch den Wunsch, nach der Katastrophe des 11. September zum Wiederaufbau Lower Manhattans beizutragen, sowie durch seine eigene Erfahrung mit der Erziehung von Kindern in einem dichten Stadtgebiet, investierte David Rockwell fünf Jahre in Forschung und Entwicklung für Konzept und Design des Imagination Playground. Rockwell Group konsultierte dafür auch renommierte Psychologen und Erziehungswissenschaftler und testete zahlreiche Prototypen.

"Playspaces: Imaginative and Immersive Environments by Rockwell Group" in der Architekturgalerie in München, Türkenstraße 30 vom 12. Mai bis 2. Juni, Mo., Di., Mi.: 9.30 bis 19 Uhr, Do. und Fr.: 9.30 bis 19.30 Uhr, Sa: 9.30 bis 18 Uhr, [www.architekturgalerie-muenchen.de](http://www.architekturgalerie-muenchen.de).

Play Event in München morgen, Samstag den 12. 5. ab 11 Uhr vor der HFF, Gabelsbergerstr. 33

Danach geht das Projekt mit Play Events und Teilen der Münchener Ausstellung vom 6. bis 10. Juni nach Berlin (DMY International Design Festival), Potsdam (15. bis 17. Juli im Erlebnisquartier Schiffbauergasse), London (6. bis 8. Juli London Festival of Architecture), dann im August zur 13. Architekturbiennale nach Venedig (29. August bis 25. November), wo es im Rahmen des U.S. Pavillons gezeigt wird, und vom 6. bis 16. September nach Helsinki, der Design Welthauptstadt 2012 (International Design House Exhibition).

(Foto 1 und 2: Imagination Playground Park, Manhattan, Photo ©: Frank Oudeman 2010. Foto 3: W Paris-Opéra, Photo © and courtesy of Starwood Hotels and Resorts. Foto 4: Oscar Verleihung, Los Angeles, Set Design 2010 – Photo © AMPAS)

KATEGORIE: KULTUR-TERMINE

THE WORLD'S FINEST PARENTING MAGAZINE

# Junior



FEBRUARY 2012

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## IT'S MAGICAL

Your child's amazing capacity to think brilliant thoughts

## POP-UP PLAYTIME

The pioneers who promote the funkiest places to play

## SHINING STARS

The brightest designers in the world of children's fashion

## GLOBAL GOURMETS

Delicious little taster dishes to celebrate the world's cuisine

# LONG LIVE LOVE!

*The sweetest ways to show your child you love her*

# Blocks, knocks & play that rocks

Meet the playground pioneers who are fuelling children's fun and creativity with their smart ideas and designs

WORDS HELEN MCKAY-FERGUSON | PHOTOGRAPHY FRANK OUDEMAN

**T**HERE'S A HUGE pile of big blue blocks in the middle of the playground. They're being picked up, chucked around, whacked against heads (never fear, they bounce off a treat) by a gaggle of gleeful hands. You've heard of pop-up shops and pop-up restaurants. Well, this is a pop-up playground: the Imagination Playground In A Cart. Designed to inspire the kind of unstructured free play that children thrive on, the cart has just rolled in to Coram's Fields in London.

The man behind this ultimate box of building blocks is American architect David Rockwell, whose glittering résumé encompasses the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles (where the Academy Awards are held), the JetBlue terminal at New York's JFK International Airport, super-swanky restaurant chain Nobu and sets for the hit Broadway musicals *Hairspray* and *Legally Blonde*.

When I spy David, he is at the heart of the action, like a tall navy blue reed towering over an anarchic whirlpool of activity. I eventually manage to prise him away to a nearby bench for a chat, where he sits with one eye trained keenly on the welter behind us.

A father of two – Sam, 11, and Lola, nine – David has given some serious thought to the business of play. “Watching my children, I was struck by how

they always liked to turn things topsy-turvy, to make up their own rules,” he says. Like many a parent, David had the experience of giving his children a new toy – in this case, an art table – only to find they were more interested in playing with the cardboard box it came in. Visiting playgrounds in his family's home city of New York also got him thinking. “I asked myself, ‘Why do playgrounds have to be so linear?’” he says. “I wondered how they could be more interactive and child-directed.”

As a child, David was immersed in a world of play, constructing dens out of old doors, wooden boards,

buckets and other bits and bobs that he found lying around.

Although he was the youngest of five children, when it came to constructive play, David was the ringleader. Born in Chicago, his family moved around a lot, relocating to Mexico from New

Jersey when he was 12. “In world where there were many sudden transitions, play was a life-saver,” he says. “It was something I could do wherever we travelled.”

In our more health- and safety-conscious times, playgrounds tend to follow a fairly typical format: slides, swings, roundabouts, and lots of matting to cushion potential falls. Which is all well and good, but it can lead to playgrounds in danger of all seeming like identikit, sanitised places, with little room for a child's exploration and experimentation. By contrast, David Rockwell's playful props introduce elements of risk and possibility that help to boost children's cognitive

**“In a world of many sudden transitions, play is a life-saver”**



FROM LEFT The listening forest at South Street Seaport; David with his blocks at Coram's Fields



development. As if to prove a point, a boy walks by us sporting a Dr Octopus-style get-up assembled from a collection of the bendy foam blocks. "He has worked out how to make an even better weapon," remarks David.

**D**AVID'S CHANCE TO create his dream playground came when he was asked to develop an area of the South Street Seaport district in downtown New York City – he had previously worked with the city authorities to design temporary buildings for a school evacuated after 9/11, as well as a viewing platform for Ground Zero. As a theme, David took inspiration from the district's dockside location. And so the Imagination Playground came to be, an intriguing play space featuring a cascading water channel, masts with pulleys, rigging to climb, a listening forest with pipes and funnels, and a collection of hessian sacks, buckets and brooms. At the centre – as the pièce de résistance – are those exciting blue blocks.

"At first, I came up with about 200 sketches of every kind of amazing play structure we could make," says David. "When I synthesised it down, I started to think about block play. I thought if you could scale up normal children's building blocks, that could be a very powerful tool." There are square blocks and curvy blocks, blocks shaped like chutes, blocks that look like swimming pool noodles. The set was designed to include blocks that two children need to handle together – an incentive for teamwork. At first, David created blocks of more than one colour. But during a

trial session, David noticed this led to colour-sorting and hoarding activities. And so he decided to make all the blocks blue, to encourage children to get on with building instead. Such was the success of these first blocks that David decided to roll out production, and there are now hundreds of versions at sites all over the world. The set at Coram's Fields was the first in the UK, and is used at special events, mainly during the summer.

As I've been talking to David, a curious thing has happened. The clashing of flailed block against flailed block has gradually subsided, giving way to a busy buzz of activity. "Children, especially boys, often need to work off some of their fight energy before getting down to constructive play," says David. Before our very eyes, tall towers and small towers, bridges and ball-runs are emerging.

### "Children need to work off their fight energy before play"

The merits of such free play have long been recognised. In 1943, Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sorensen opened his groundbreaking play space, Skrammellegepladsen, at Emdrup in Copenhagen. Observing how children liked to play with junk materials, Sorensen created a playground where they could indulge in just that: Skrammel means junk and Legepladsen means playground in Danish. Play leaders were employed to keep a watchful eye on things but, other than that, children were encouraged to let loose on an enticing assortment of materials, from planks of wood to discarded tyres, old rope to abandoned furniture. Inspired by Sorensen's work, Lady Allen of Hurtwood brought the concept to Britain in the Fifties, renaming such play spaces adventure playgrounds, many carved out quite literally from the rubble left by the Second



The Imagination Playground in South Street Seaport, New York City, was the first to feature David's blue blocks



FROM LEFT: High Road Open Space in Enfield, which has rock formations to climb; Waterside Play And Youth Project in Islington has dens galore



World War. These days the term adventure playground has come to encompass those where play equipment is more challenging than the average swing or slide, and where physical play is coupled with flights into the imagination.

**O**NE SHINING EXAMPLE of this is the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Playground in Kensington Gardens, with its Peter Pan pirate ship, tipi village and sensory trail. Another is the Adventure Playground in New York's Central Park, designed by acclaimed architect Richard Dattner, which features fort-style structures with poles, tunnels and ladders. And following in Sorensen's footsteps is Danish landscape architect Helle Nebelong, who has created exciting play spaces including the Garden of the Senses in Copenhagen, which features a maze of paths, sculptures to clamber over, a riverscape and a garden of fragrances.

However, according to Mick Conway from Play England, an obsession with health and safety is inhibiting playground design. "Around a third of a new playground's budget can end up being spent on soft matting, or putting a secure fence around it," says Conway. "We need to get away from that thinking. After all, a few bruises are a normal part of childhood." His views echo those of play pioneer Lady Allen, who took on the health

#### INVENTIVE WAYS TO PLAY

- **Climbing walls, ropes and rigging** Physically challenging play helps your child to develop his sensory systems, improving movement, balance, and his awareness of body position.
- **Camps, dens and cardboard boxes** Building secret spaces exercises your child's motor skills and imagination, plus encourages teamwork.
- **Fantasy worlds** Pirates, knights and invaders, lanes in dens – an exciting backdrop can help your child realise his favourite fantasy roles.
- **Water play** Tricked through his fingers or sloshed about in buckets, water offers your child a sensory adventure, plus the possibility to investigate the science of sinking and floating.
- **Cook-outs and open fires** Searching for firewood calls for sharp powers of observation, while barbecuing food or toasting marshmallows, under adult supervision, hones culinary skills.

and safety brigade of her day with the riposte: "Better a broken arm than a broken spirit." Play England is committed to breathing life back in to the nation's play spaces. As part of the Designed For Play scheme, 3,000 existing playgrounds were refurbished from 2007 to 2010, and 30 new adventure playgrounds were built. At The Ridge Adventure Playground in Nottingham, children can scale a pyramid or set to work on the urban beach; the High Road Open Space in Enfield has boulders to climb on; the Waterside Play And Youth Project in Islington offers exciting activities like den-building; and at Old Fallings Adventure Playground in

Wolverhampton, the new play centre has a roof children can climb on, plus a garden where they can try pond-dipping and cook on open fires. The Forestry Commission is also embracing a philosophy of adventurous play: instead of dismantling dens found in woods, rangers now leave them standing. And if they find a rope swing, the policy is to give it a tug, and leave it if it seems secure.

At Coram's Fields, things are getting ever more ambitious. "Those guys have worked out they can make a stairway. I've never seen anybody do that before," says David, as children charge excitedly up and down. David is clearly itching to join in. "Want to get up and play?" he asks. And who could resist? ■

Icon August, 2011

# ICON

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TOYS  
August 2011

**DAVID ROCKWELL**  
The American architect applies child psychology to the playground

**FLORIS HOVERS**  
Playful thoughts and litter boats with the Peter Pan of Dutch design

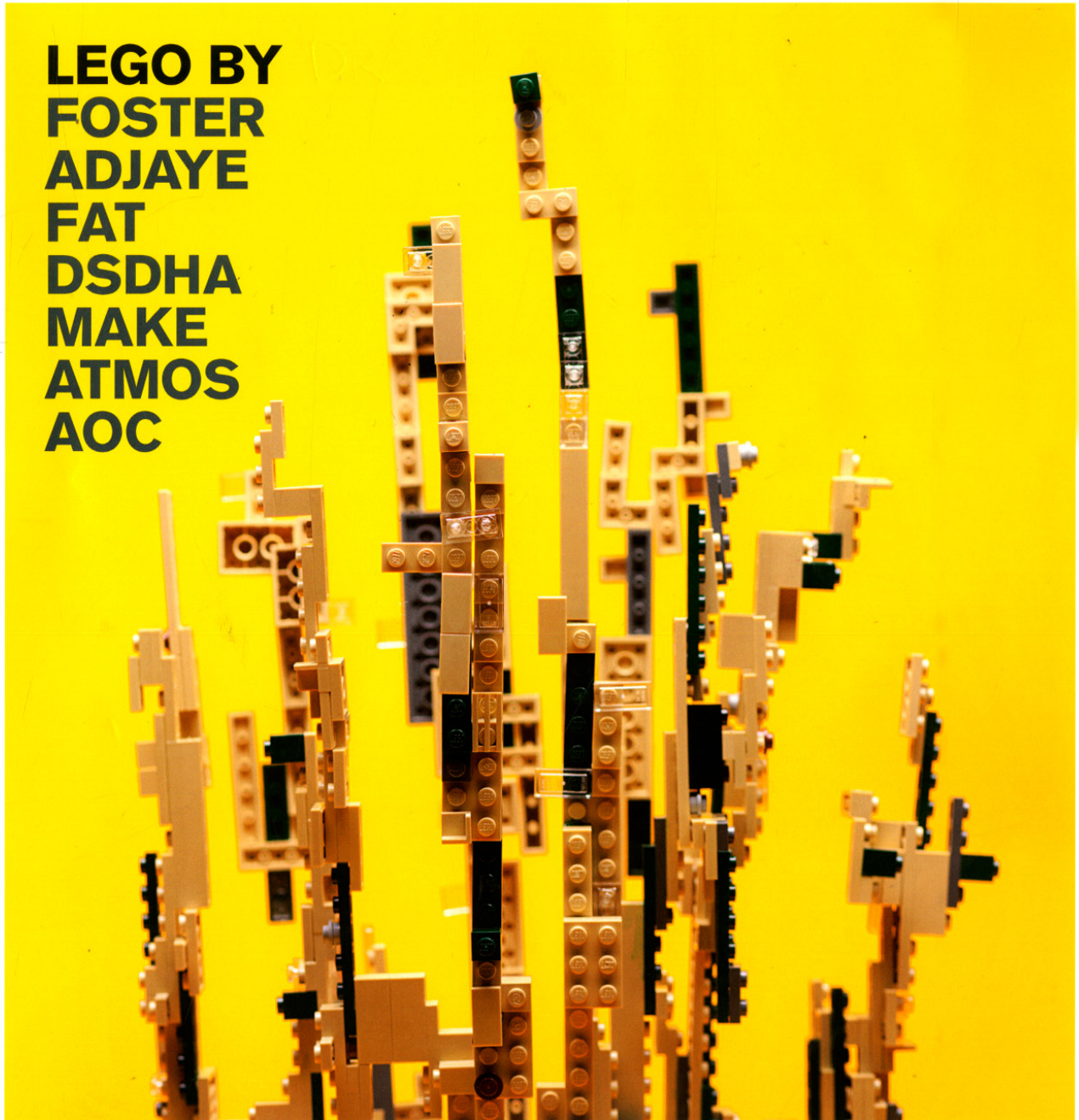
**CONSTRUCTION KITS**  
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ATMOS  
AOC**





TOYS

# Object lesson

WORDS:  
George Pendle

David Rockwell's Imagination Playground in lower Manhattan aims to get kids designing and building for themselves. So how do you go about creating creativity without telling kids what to do?

As you'd expect in a moon-sized space station, the Star Wars Death Star is replete with amenities fit for an emperor. There's a throne room and a detention block, droid maintenance facilities and a conference room, a trash compactor and, of course, a planet-destroying super laser. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that in its Lego incarnation it takes 3,803 separate building blocks to create the battle station in all its fully armed and operational glory.

Speaking from his office in Manhattan, the architect David Rockwell reminisces about how he and his two young children slaved over the Lego Death Star for two weeks, as they painstakingly followed the instructions. In the days that followed its completion, however, as the Death Star lost pieces to the solar wind buffets and asteroid fields of day-to-day play, Rockwell noticed that something new and unscripted was taking place.

"When half the pieces were lost, which happens unless you have museum cases, then my kids would pick up the stray pieces and start creating new things. I started to recognise that what kids try to do is to create their own rules, their own way to play."

It is this innate willingness to throw away the instructions and allow children to play in a self-directed manner that infuses the Rockwell Group's Imagination Playground, which opened in lower Manhattan last year. A multi-Σ

**Right**  
The size of the blocks turns them into social toys rather than individual ones



IMAGE: ROCKWELL GROUP/BLANDON BELUSHIN



level, peanut-shaped space, the Imagination Playground is the very definition of an urban playground, surrounded by mammoth glass towers, the East River and the thundering traffic of the FDR Drive. There are sand pits and water pools, and a serpentine fence that pays respects to the nearby historic seaport. But what truly marks it out from other playgrounds is the vast array of large blue foam blocks that are scattered around the site.

These blocks – some 350 of them in 20 different designs – can be rolled, rotated, pivoted, sat on, worn, and easily combined to build walls or ladders, rivers or dams. As such they provide children not with a static plaything, like a traditional slide or seesaw, but with one that is intrinsically protean.

Yet if one of the central tenets of child's play is that building a structure comes before discovering its use, how does an architect, whose creed is diametrically opposed to this, go about creating

**Left**  
Children have used the blocks to create a variety of structures

**Below**  
The playground also includes sand pits

something that is structured enough to work as a building block, yet multi-faceted enough not to be restrictive?

"It was about finding the simplest common denominator," says Rockwell. "I started by sketching out about 100 different interesting things you could create that would engage children's instincts to play."

The designs included durable pinframes – screens filled with moveable pins which retain the impression of an object being pressed into them – as well as wheels filled with sand and simple carousels that could be created from various parts. Ultimately, however, Rockwell found that increased utility could only be found with decreased complexity. "We mocked them up and synthesised them down to what were the most flexible pieces and naturally started to think about block play."

Block play has long been known to help develop children's cognitive and motor skills, but usually on an individual basis. Rockwell decided to scale up his blocks, so that some of the pieces needed two children to handle

them with ease, making them social rather than solitary toys.

Nevertheless at the heart of the Imagination Playground lies an inherent contradiction: how does a rigorously designed and deliberate space prompt spontaneity? To answer this Rockwell delved deep into the history of the playground.

Since the mid-19th century, no public space has excited moralists and psychologists as much as the playground. In the late Victorian era, when physical exercise was seen as having a moral dimension, playgrounds with isolated swings and slides were seen as essential places to build better citizens. By the early 1900s, as sand pits and climbing frames became acceptable playthings, playgrounds were seen as safe havens for children, in direct opposition to the vices and violence found in the streets. But it was amid the devastation that followed the Second World War that the greatest leap forward in playground design took place. In Copenhagen, adventure playgrounds blossomed. These were little more than bombed-out lots in which children could play with whatever tarps, tires and two-by-fours they could find. These playgrounds abandoned traditional equipment and admitted that an acceptance of risk was necessary if meaningful child's play was to prosper.

At the same time artists and architects were starting to look at playgrounds afresh. Aldo van Eyck's site-specific work in Amsterdam integrated playgrounds into the urban fabric, while in New York the Museum of Modern Art and educational toy manufacturer Creative Playthings were instrumental in promoting the union of playgrounds and cutting-edge sculpture in a number of exhibitions.

Chief among Rockwell's influences, however, was the never-built Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn playground scheduled for New York's Riverside Park. Begun in 1961, the playground was to be moulded out of an eight-acre stretch of steep ground. It was to be filled with truncated earth pyramids that were perfect for climbing up and sliding down and surrounded by Noguchi's sculptural toys. There was no set way for entering the park, no path to follow. It was to be explored at leisure, to be played with how you will. It was, in the architectural historian Susan Solomon's words, "a single unified composition of bold geometric shapes based on interrelated and interconnected parts". (It was attacked at the time by the New York City Parks Commissioner as "an unjustifiable architectural monument", which would appeal only to tourists and the "avant-garde".)

Indeed, when Noguchi and Kahn's design is combined with the modular plywood Tyng Toys created by Kahn's frequent collaborator



IMAGES: DARIN MICKLEY, FRANK OUDEMAN



I started by sketching out 100 different interesting things you could create that would engage children's instincts to play



086  
DAVID ROCKWELL



This page  
The playground  
is hemmed in  
by mammoth  
towers, as  
well as by FDR  
Drive and the  
East River



IMAGE: FRANK OUIDEMAN

088  
DAVID ROCKWELL

Anne Tyng in the late 1940s, which children could turn into any number of play structures, a historical blueprint for the Imagination Playground reveals itself clearly.

When Rockwell first announced that he was going to be developing a playground – in private-public partnership with the New York Department of Parks & Recreation and to the eventual cost of \$7.5 million – he reached out to environmental psychologists such as Roger Hart at the City University of New York, and the British adventure playground operator Penny Wilson, as well as Solomon, whose brilliant study *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space* (2005) both describes the halcyon days of post-war playground design and also laments the obsessive focus on playground safety of the following decades.

“They first contacted me in 2006,” Solomon says, “and we talked about the things that had been done in the late 1960s and 70s until they had a very firm grasp of what had gone on in playgrounds, and especially what had gone wrong. I directed them to sources, to books on theory and books on the importance of play. I guess I was more of a sounding board resource as to what was out there in the written world.”

In the meantime, parents were also letting Rockwell know how their children should be playing. “We got a lot of feedback very quickly,” he says. “I guess the way we approached it was we were open to all. But just like we don’t tell kids how to play, we didn’t ask the parents to tell us how to develop this.”

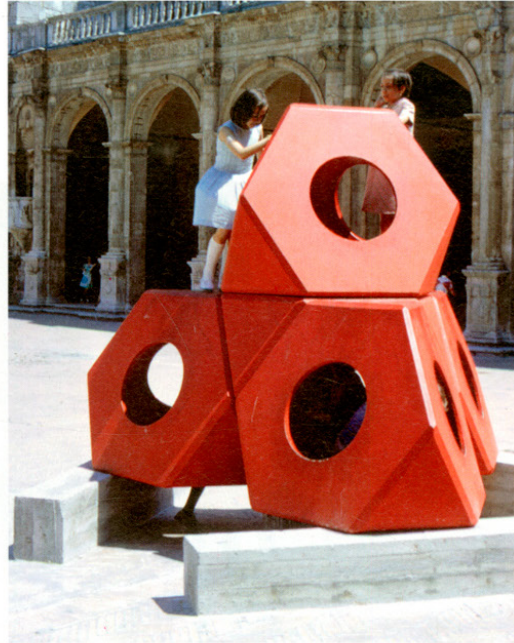
“They really wanted to make a change,” Solomon concurs. “They were very respectful of what was out there but they really wanted to shift the paradigm. What was really gratifying about them was that they listened, which you can’t always say is true about clients.”

“Sometimes it’s helpful to do something you haven’t done before,” says Rockwell. “It allows you a kind of fresh approach. I think both the playgroups and experts we talked to were pleased to have our enthusiasm and our lack of limits. We didn’t have blinders on yet.”

In order to see if his initial set of blocks could stimulate the kind of unstructured play he was looking for, Rockwell held test play-dates. “A lot of the test play-dates began with boys using the noodles [the long cylindrical foam blocks] to fight, which of course freaked all of the grown-ups out,” recalls Rockwell. “And almost all the play began with individual play as opposed to collaboration. But 15 or 20 minutes in, and after we had all resisted the urge to tell the kids what to do, what we found is they would start to collaborate. Kids would inevitably look to their left



Without instruction, kids were building things that we didn’t think were buildable



**Above**  
Octetra by Isamu Noguchi in Spoleto, Italy, 1968

**Below**  
Moerenuma Park, also by Noguchi, in Sapporo, Japan, 1988-2004

**Right**  
The site contains 350 blocks of 20 different designs

and say, ‘Well, this boy has created that, how do I link my thing to their thing?’ And so that became a fascinating thing to see, the urge to participate and build together.”

In response to these tests, the playground’s seating areas were set far back from the play area itself, encouraging parents not to meddle in their children’s play. And although the Imagination Playground has a “play associate”, who is on call throughout the day to encourage and prompt, their main role, as Rockwell admits, is to stop any of the blocks “walking”.

Indeed, during unguided play the blocks’ versatility surprised even Rockwell himself. “The strange thing was we found that, without instruction, kids were building things that we didn’t think were buildable. We didn’t really think you could create vehicles, it wasn’t part of our thing.”

The success of the Imagination Playground has led to Rockwell creating portable versions of his blocks – the Imagination Playground in a Box – that allows local authorities to transform even the dullest of playgrounds. There are now over 200 in use throughout the US. Similarly a permanent Imagination Playground is scheduled to be opened in London by the end of the summer.

What has surprised many is that the Rockwell Group should have chosen this path to go down, yet Rockwell himself sees the playground as being a natural extension of his work in restaurant and theatre design.

“When we do a restaurant – we just did a Nobu in Beijing – the issues we’re dealing with are, of course, problem-solving and layout and creating a design that grows out of Nobu’s narrative and relates to the food and relates locally to the site and context. But we’re also trying to create a place that, once you go through that front door and you enter it, you also feel a little bit freer to engage and participate and play. That’s always been kind of an obsession with us.” ■





IMAGES: COURTESY OF THE ISAMU NOGUCHI FOUNDATION AND GARDEN MUSEUM, NEW YORK, KABOOM



**色彩游乐场** 其设计突破了传统方式，所有道具都可以拆卸，反映了“拥挤文化”的不定性

material courtesy of • Rockwell Group, edited by • 梁万

**IMAGINATION PLAYGROUND** THE DESIGN STYLE  
BREAK THROUGH THE TRADITIONAL WAY, ALL PROPS  
CAN BE REMOVED, REFLECTING THE "CULTURE OF  
CONGESTION" OF THE UNCERTAINTY





通过自由松散的部件，游乐场使孩子们可以不断改变玩具器械的排列，并重新设计、组合，创造出全新的游玩情境，设计属于他们自己的游戏规则。

- With a focus on loose parts, Imagination Playground offers a changing array of elements that allows children to constantly reconfigure their environment and to design their own course of play.



色彩游乐场建在海港地区，位于曼哈顿下城。曼哈顿是高密度都市中社区规划的成功范例。整个地区近几年正处于居住房产的繁荣期也是很多纽约人向往居住的地区。游乐场建造在曼哈顿下城的最南端的海港上，周围的高密度环境以掌握了全球经济命脉的华尔街金融地区最为出名。摩天大楼，巨大的商业购物中心，百老汇，时报广场等都集中在曼哈顿这个狭长的岛上。海港地区的居住人口在过去的10年内急速增长，预计在下一个10年内会继续增长。据统计2009年7月曼哈顿的人口密度为70.951/sq mi(27.394.3/km<sup>2</sup>)它是全美人口密度最高的纽约富人区。而曼哈顿也是全世界摩天大楼建筑密度最高的区域。几座最为出名的摩天大楼，曾经的世界贸易中心(The World Trade Center)，帝国大厦(Empire State Building)，克莱斯勒大厦(Chrysler Building)，华尔街40号(40 Wall Street)，伍尔沃斯大楼(Woolworth Building)，大都会人寿保险大楼(Met Life Tower)这些都是世界上排名前10的最高建筑。

早在70年代，纽约曼哈顿就以“拥挤文化”著称并且成为许多规划建筑师研究的对象。所谓“拥挤文化”从最为直观的角度来看就是曼哈顿的摩天大楼组成的高层高密度聚集，曼哈顿也因此被誉为是世界上最直接的拥挤文化的现实代表。在这里摩天楼成为最好的社会聚合器，它将不同乃至完全相反的生活方式以层的形式叠置在一起，形成独特的都市拥挤文化。

2010年8月，纽约市市长迈克尔·彭博(Michael Bloomberg)与建筑师大卫·罗克韦尔(David Rockwell)，共同为纽约市中心充满想象色彩的游乐场拉开帷幕。

这个游乐场经过5年的策划、开发和测试，最终建成。它是由罗克韦尔建筑团队构思和设计的公益项目，是属于曼哈顿滨水绿色走廊项目的一部分。游乐场建造在曼哈顿最南端的海港上，周围的高密度环境以掌握了全球经济命脉的华尔街金融区最为出名。摩天大楼、百老汇、时报广场等都集中在曼哈顿这个狭长的岛上。

色彩游乐场的用地是一个被等待再利用率高的临时停车场，2004年被市政府规划为游乐场公共空间，共占地2050平方米。大卫·罗克韦尔将创新的设计理念完美的与高效率的土地利用结合在一起，构成了第一个永久的充满想



象力的游乐场。

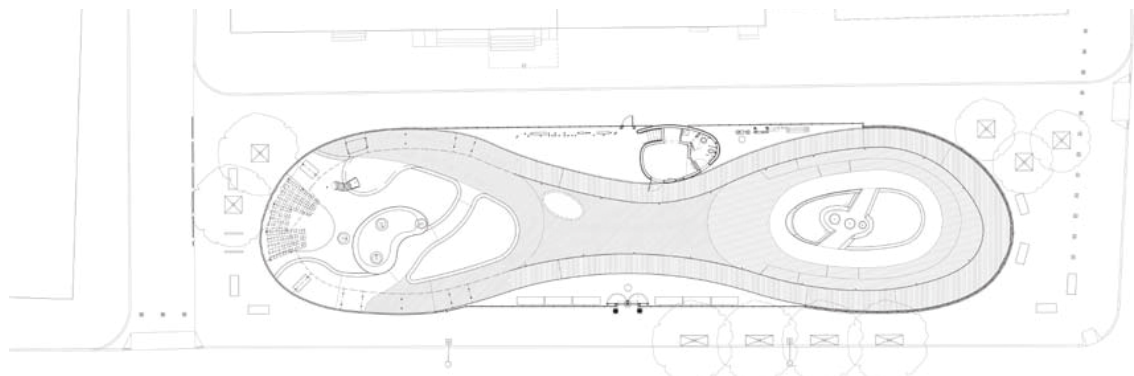
纽约市市长在开幕仪式的发布会上强调：“色彩游乐场的设计是为了给儿童提供一个多元化的活动场所。这个创新的游乐场让儿童一边探索、一边设计，将培养学习的兴趣和玩耍结合到了一起。”他还给予大卫·罗克韦尔的设计非常高的评价。他说“与世界优秀的建筑师合作完成卓越的作品以及空间设计，也再一次证明了市政府对规划设计有着很高的要求”。罗克韦尔在发布会上说：“我对第一个永久的充满想象力的游乐场充满自豪，身为罗克韦尔集团的总裁首席建筑师，我也是曼哈顿的居民以及一位父亲。我对纽约这个城市充满了感激，因为游乐场的开启可以让更多的居住在我们城市里的儿童，充分发挥自己的想象力和动手能力，一边动手一边玩耍。”

色彩游乐场突破了提供单一游乐设施的传统方式，这里的所有游乐设施都是有变通性的。它由3个部分组成，一个开放式的沙滩游泳池，一个巨大的玩具器械单元组合，以及零散的游乐设施。这3个部分可以让儿童们尽情的创造再重组。

色彩游乐场因所有道具都可以拆卸而反映了拥挤文化的不定性。罗克韦尔将3个部分放在同一地点让儿童们在同一游乐场获得了各自的空间。整个设计也表现出纽约摩天大楼的特质：在游乐场中儿童无法再通过单一的功能认知单一的部分，而游乐场本质十分僵化的物体内部却包含千变万化，为儿童提供各种不同方式的游乐体验内容。

罗克韦尔集团的设计让游乐场与有着悠久商业历史的曼哈顿海港有了一个完美的结合。它的建筑环境为一圆形凹地，外加游乐场的3个组成部分将它组成了一个航海船的外形，船上有模拟瀑布、登山绳、滑车和望远镜舷梯一系列的游乐设施。游乐场的建设也是象征了纽约是一个艺术创新的游乐场。

开篇，顶图：鲜艳的玩具器械总勾起儿童的探索欲。  
对页，上图：公共游乐场第2部分：巨大的玩具器械单元组合。  
对页，下图：公共游乐场第3部分：零散的娱乐设施。  
本篇，上图：公共游乐场第1部分：开放式的沙滩游泳池。



总平面图  
Site plan



**纽约曼哈顿色彩游乐场**  
**Imagination Playground**  
美国，曼哈顿下城  
New York, USA

合作伙伴 Partner: 纽约市政府公共空间管理部门  
设计单位 Design unit: Rockwell Group  
总设计师 Chief Designer: David Rockwell  
首席设计师 Founder and CEO: David Rockwell  
策划 总监 Strategy Director: Marc Hacker  
项目主要负责人 Principal-in-Charge: Carmen Aguilar, Barry Richards  
项目经理兼设计师 Project Manager/Project Architect: Glenn Fulk  
项目经理 Project Manager:

Leslie Armstrong  
项目设计师 Project Architect: Mala Parikh  
建筑设计团队 Architecture Project Team: Sterling McMurrin and Claudia Opel  
工业设计团队 Industrial Design Project Team: Caroline Kim, Shunyi Wu, Cas Holman and Lucinda Waite  
总建筑面积 The gross land area: 18,000 square.ft (包括广场)  
地上建筑面积 Ground Floor Area: 12,000 square.ft  
人口密度 Population density: 27,394.3/km<sup>2</sup>  
设计开始时间 Start Date: (Concept began) 2005  
建设开始时间 Start Date: (Construction began) 2009.05  
竣工时间 Complete time: 2010.07



*Rockwell Group's Imagination Playground offers "loose parts," like an adventure playground, but it's geared toward a younger crowd.*

**By Daniel Jost, ASLA**

**T**HINK BACK TO YOUR CHILDHOOD. What is your favorite memory of playing outside? For New York City's parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe, Honorary ASLA, the answer to that question has nothing to do with slides or teeter-totters.

Some of Benepe's most vivid childhood memories involve digging streambeds in the sloping soil of his neighborhood playground and pouring buckets of water down them. "We would invariably be chased out by the curmudgeonly 'Parkies,'" Benepe remembers.

Introducing a talk at the parks department headquarters a few years back, Benepe asked those present to share their own favorite memory of playing outside. "There were 25 people, and only one person mentioned the designed pieces of playgrounds," recalls Roger Hart, the director of the Children's Environments Research Group at the City University of New York.



# Loosens Up

That's because the standard American playground is a "bizarre environment," as Hart says. Everything is fixed to the ground. Hart and colleagues like Robin Moore, Affiliate ASLA, have long pushed for more "loose parts" on playgrounds. Fixed equipment can provide places to run, climb, swing, and slide, but it offers few opportunities for creative play. Sure, some kids may pretend that a slide is a space shuttle or that a raised platform is a pirate ship, but their options are seriously limited by the static nature of most playground environments.

That's scarcely a problem at Imagination Playground, which opened in Lower Manhattan last July. Designed by architects at New York's Rockwell Group, an office obsessed with color, spectacle, and exuberance, it combines sand, water, and giant foam blocks that look like something out of a Dr. Seuss book. All can be moved and redirected. "The essential components are kids

**Unlike most playgrounds where everything is bolted to the ground, Imagination Playground provides loose parts in an effort to encourage creative play.**

imagining something," says David Rockwell, "building it, ripping it down, and starting all over again."

Not since the High Line debuted last summer has a landscape received so much attention in the popular press. The playground was featured in both *Time* and the *New Yorker* before it even opened. And a press tour in July attracted NPR, the *New York Times*, *Architectural Record*, and a variety of local publications and blogs.

As with the High Line, the ideas behind Imagination Playground are not new, but its completion is no less surprising for that. Until recently, most playground designers had all but given up on providing "loose parts" in public playgrounds—especially





manufactured loose parts. "In big public parks like you have in New York, you just can't have a playground that has to be taken apart and stored someplace safe every night," the landscape architect Donna Walcavage told *Landscape Architecture* in 1994. But every day this summer, the staff at Imagination Playground did just that.

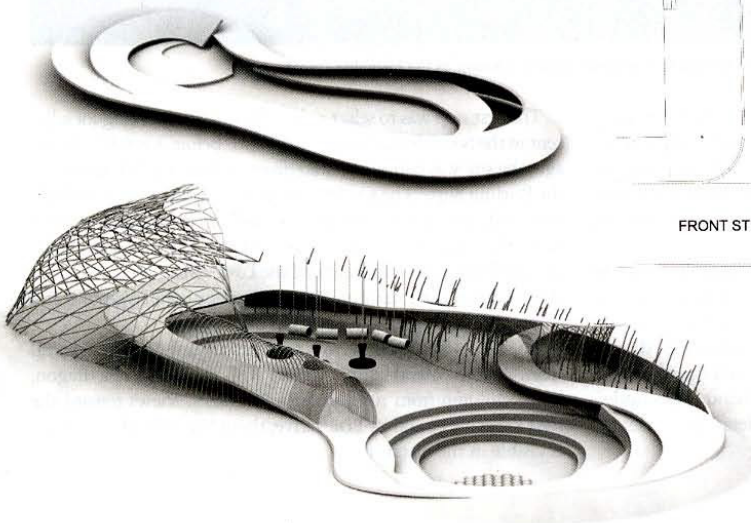
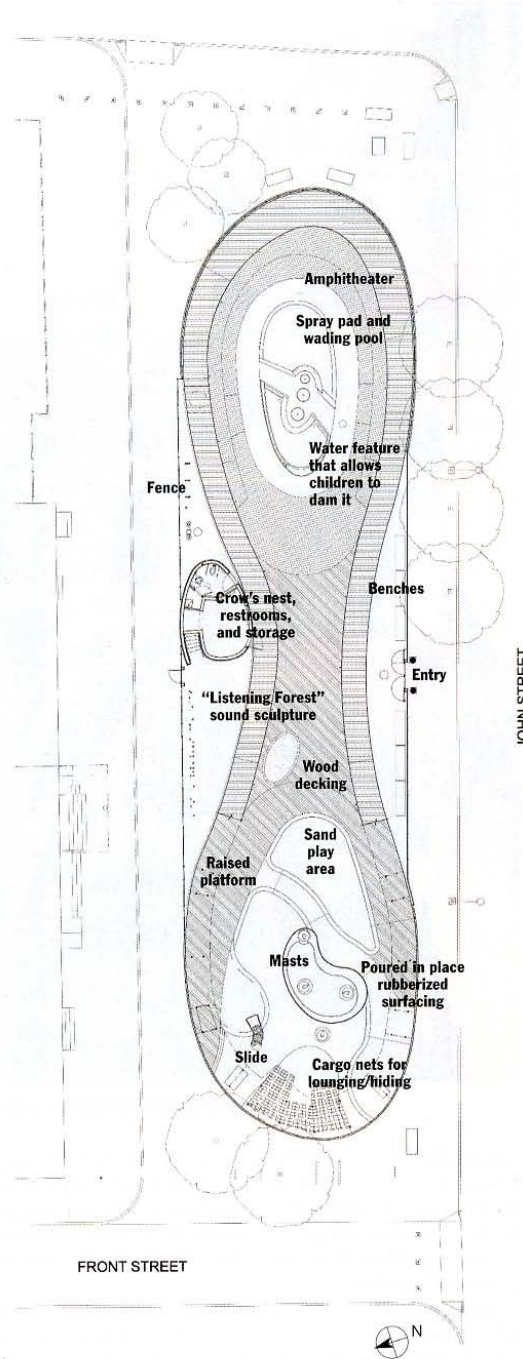
**Pro Bono Playground**

Like many innovative projects, Imagination Playground took more than a dash of guts. "This playground would not have happened if I hadn't gotten a phone call one day from David Rockwell," Benepe explains. It was a cold call. The two had never met, but they immediately bonded over their shared interest in play.

Rockwell had always wanted to design a playground, but it wasn't until his own children, Sam and Lola, reached prime playground age that he really began to throw himself into the subject. As he took his children to playgrounds throughout the city, he

The Rockwell Group designed these large foam blocks, *opposite*, so they can be used for molding sand and channeling water. Imagination Playground is located on the site of an old parking lot, *above*, adjacent to the South Street Seaport Museum. A plan, *right*, shows how the playground is divided into two areas, one focused on sand, the other on water. Rockwell Group used models, *below*, to study the playground's form.

BLANDIN BELUSHIN, OPPOSITE, COURTESY ROCKWELL GROUP, THIS PAGE







A child plays with his mother at a sound sculpture known as the Listening Forest.

realized that “while there was a great variety in how the playgrounds looked, it felt like their play value was very similar,” Rockwell says. His kids loved to turn things upside down, to create their own rules, and the playgrounds they visited often actively discouraged that. So, he offered to design a more imaginative playground, pro bono.

Although Rockwell Group had designed playgrounds for the rich—fancy, cheeky restaurants and hotels—it had never designed a children’s playground. But as Hart, who was later brought on as a consultant, explains, the firm’s work in theater, designing stage sets for the Oscars, *Hairspray*, and *Legally Blonde*, prepared them perfectly for the challenge at hand. They understood that their job was not to dictate every detail, but to set the stage for what came next.

The first step was to select a site. They chose a parking lot adjacent to the South Street Seaport Museum. Before it was filled years ago, the site was part of the waterfront, a shipping hub known as the Burling Slip. “The site fit two criteria: A playground was badly needed, and there was funding for one,” Rockwell explains. They were able to tap into funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, securing \$4.3 million for the playground and additional funding for underground utility work.

The site is long and narrow and surrounded by streets on all sides. A black metal fence, overlaid with the image of a dragon, keeps children from running into the street. Views toward the East River are cut off by FDR Drive, though a series of ship masts is visible in the distance.

The site is rectangular, though Rockwell has overlaid a design shaped like an infinity symbol or perhaps a peanut. A sinuous ramp defines the northwestern edge, and a series of steps that double as an amphitheater carries the form through on the southeastern side. The playground's wood decking is meant to recall the ships that once docked here, as is a series of masts with pulleys and burlap bags attached that children can play with.

There are three main areas of the playground. To the north is a sand area. On the south is a sort of wading pool/spray pad hybrid with a flowing water feature that children can dam. And in the middle are an interactive sound sculpture, an open wood deck, and a giant metal crow's nest, which houses the restroom and provides a place to store the loose parts. These parts include

**Rockwell Group understood that their job was not to dictate every detail, but to set the stage for what came next.**

foam blocks, blankets, burlap bags, wheelbarrows, buckets, and shovels. Different parts are brought out at different times to mix up the play experience. The only conventional play equipment used here is the plastic slide that comes down from the ramp.

The city had already begun experimenting with loose parts at a few of its playgrounds before Rockwell came along. After Hart gave a presentation to the parks department, "We went out and found large cardboard blocks, costumes, pieces of cloth, and things to work in the sand," Benepe explains. But some of these objects had a short life span in an outdoor environment. There really weren't any standard products they could turn to. To design a permanent playground with loose parts, Rockwell Group basically would have to design its own parts.

The designers made hundreds of sketches and began mocking up blocks. They brought on the playground historian Susan Solomon and Hart as consultants. The architects held a number of pilot play dates



During the design process, Rockwell Group held play dates to see how children would respond to their block designs. They observed that larger blocks seemed to encourage more collaboration.

The greatest lesson from these play dates, Rockwell says, was that size matters.

“When the blocks get bigger, play becomes more social,” he explains. They may require more than one toddler to move them. Another lesson was that certain shapes were especially fun when combined with sand and water. Kids could create runnels or mold the sand with the blocks.

BLANCO BELUSHIN

## A Brief History of “Loose Parts”

**EARLY 1930s:** Carl Theodor Sørensen, a Danish landscape architect, notices that children seem to enjoy playing with the construction materials on the playgrounds he is building more than the completed playgrounds themselves. He proposes setting aside spaces where children can play with leftover construction materials and build their own playgrounds.

**AUGUST 1943:** Sørensen’s first “skrammellegepladsen” or “junk playground” opens in Emdrup, a suburb of Copenhagen, Denmark.

**LATE 1940s/EARLY 1950s:** Junk playgrounds emerge throughout Europe following World War II, often blossoming on sites scarred by bombings.

**1950:** *McCall’s* magazine sponsors a one-year experiment on vacant land adjacent to the Edith Cavell Grade School in Minneapolis. Over the course of a year, the playground welcomes children between the ages of eight and 16, providing them with small lots where they can dig or build. While

generally viewed as a success by those involved, the model is not widely replicated in the United States.

**1953:** Worried that the term “junk playground” sounds derogatory in English, the landscape architect Lady Allen of Hurtwood and Sir George Pepler coin a more palatable name: “adventure playground.”

**1965:** During a whirlwind speaking tour in the United States, Allen tells *Time* magazine: “The successful playground is one in which children can move things around and make them obedient to their own wills.” Her tour leads to further experimentation with the adventure playground model in the United States.

**1968:** “Adventure Playground,” designed by the architect Richard Dattner, opens in Central Park. The area is not a true adventure playground. Most of its features are fixed in place; however, large areas of sand and modular wood panels offer children ways to manipulate their environment. Neighborhood parents rally together to fund a play associate during the early

The blocks, made out of blue foam, are manufactured in the United States by M. H. Stallman Company. "It's a very dense cross-linked polyethylene foam—lightweight, soft, and resistant to sun, heat, and mildew," Rockwell says. "It's biodegradable and can be returned to the manufacturer to be recycled."

As word spread about the project, KaBOOM!, a nonprofit known for building playgrounds in neighborhoods that lack them, contacted Rockwell about a partnership to create playground kits that could be released in communities across the country.

Even before the first permanent Imagination Playground could be completed, they rolled out "Imagination Playground in a BOX," a container full of loose parts that could turn just about any site into an imagination playground. The profits from this venture will be used to develop playgrounds where they are needed.

The first Imagination Playground in a BOX debuted at a community center in Brooklyn's Brownsville neighborhood in 2008. "We didn't have to give one iota of instruction," says Rockwell. "You had kids building houses and playing house. You had kids hurdling over pieces."

#### Overcoming the Typical Hurdles

The term "loose parts" was coined by Simon Nicholson, whose influential "Theory of Loose Parts" was published in this magazine in October 1971 (see "A Brief History of 'Loose Parts,'" below). But you could say the granddaddy of loose parts was Carl Theodor

#### Where Can Loose Parts Work?

**WHILE OBTAINING FUNDING for trained play associates may not be possible right away in every community, loose parts could easily be incorporated into the summer programs many cities already offer where teens lead activities at playgrounds. There would also seem to be opportunities for incorporating blocks into schoolyards, where recess is already monitored. Many parks with spray pads, including Silver Plaza in Silver Spring, Maryland, and Discovery Green in Houston, already pay for staff to supervise the site during busy periods. How much more interesting would these places be if they offered children a chance to manipulate the environment and not just cool off?**

Sørensen, a Danish landscape architect, who created the first adventure playground in 1943. Adventure playgrounds provide a safe setting where older children can build structures using surplus construction materials such as old tires, rope, hammers, and saws.

The adventure playground concept has been a big hit in Europe, but it never really caught on in the United States. A flood of articles during the 1960s and 1970s led some communities to experiment with adventure playgrounds, but very few of them remain in the United States.

"People thought [they] looked junky and said, 'Not in my neighborhood, thank you,'" explains Clare Cooper Marcus, Honorary ASLA, who spent the early years of her career studying children's environments. Despite studies showing adventure playgrounds are actually safer than conventional playgrounds, "people thought they looked dangerous," Marcus says.

Rockwell's loose parts seem to transcend these issues. Imagination Playground looks less like a trash-strewn lot or shantytown than it does a disorganized family room strewn with Tinkertoys. There are no saws or nails or heavy bricks that might give parents pause; instead, the loose parts are made of soft foam, harmless in even the youngest child's hands.

But Hart believes that Rockwell has not created an adventure playground that's palatable to Americans, that he's created something entirely different, perhaps something totally new. Adventure playgrounds typically serve kids age eight and up. Most of the

years, but when funding dries up, the play worker and the panels disappear. Much of the sand is also removed during a renovation in the 1990s.

**OCTOBER 1971:** *Landscape Architecture* publishes Simon Nicholson's much cited Theory of Loose Parts: "In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables [or loose parts] in it."

**1979:** "Adventure Playground" opens in Berkeley, California. A true adventure playground, in the mold of its European counterparts, it still remains an anomaly in the United States three decades later.

**1970s/1980s:** American playground manufacturers copy the style of adventure playgrounds, using large timbers, rope, and tires to create fixed structures; however, the idea for loose parts is generally rejected, since most American playgrounds are unsupervised.

**EARLY 1990s:** Robin Moore suggests a more natural alternative to the adventure playground: "I've come to the conclusion that the best loose-parts play space is one that kids create themselves out of their own foragings from nature," Moore told *Landscape Architecture* in October 1994. "This option is easier to manage and more acceptable to the public than the traditional adventure playground built from scrap lumber."

**MAY 2008:** Snug debuts a line of "loose parts" playground equipment made out of durable foam in the United Kingdom (see "Bringing Loose Parts to a Playground Near You," page 92).

**JULY 2008:** The Rockwell Group, KaBOOM!, and the New York City parks department bring Imagination Playground in a BOX to Brownsville.

**JULY 2010:** The first permanent imagination playground opens in Lower Manhattan.



The sand area, *above*, includes a raised sand pit, meant to be accessible to children in wheelchairs, a series of “masts” with a pulley system, and a water feature, *right*, which became the source for a small riverbed through the sand on the day I visited.

kids playing in the sand area at Imagination Playground on the day we visited were about eight years old or younger. In the water area, they were even smaller. “The average age was two and a half, maybe three,” Hart says. “These children at the moment don’t have any places to manipulate the environment. If they’re rich kids, they may sometimes get out of the city and play in nature. But many kids have no opportunity to manipulate their environment with other children.”

At Imagination Playground, “children are building off one another’s shoulders creatively, and that’s something that isn’t generally available in a playground,” says Hart. “At most playgrounds, kids who already know each other play alone. They may chase



FRANK OUBEMAN, TOP; BLANDON BELUSHIN, BOTTOM



The water area has a very shallow pool with spray jets and a raised channel that children can dam. It is surrounded by stairs that offer amphitheater seating.

once in a while, but the things that are there for them to do are all about individual activities. This playground is inviting collaboration. There's a lot of social interacting going on."

#### Play Workers

"One of the problems with loose parts that are manufactured is they have to be locked up at night," says Marcus. "In that respect, it's tricky putting them into a public park because you have to pay someone to organize that."

Hart believes it was the lack of play workers that ultimately doomed adventure playgrounds in New York. "Mayor [John] Lindsay was allowing lots of innovation, but he wasn't particularly pay-

ing for it," he explains. "The adventure playgrounds opened in New York during the 1970s were often volunteer operations. There was no management, no play worker training. They ended up being garbage-strewn lots very often. I told [Rockwell], it might seem tough but you have to find money for play workers."

Rockwell has committed to work with the city to raise the money necessary. So far, they have raised around \$2 million, which is being managed by the City Parks Foundation. The goal is to raise \$6 or \$7 million, enough to endow the playground's operating costs forever.

The parks department estimates that staffing Imagination Playground with play workers (or "play associates," as they call

them) will cost \$152,689 annually, an amount that includes training costs. During the summer, there were six workers, all working full time, and the playground was open from 9:00 AM to 7:00 PM daily. After school began in September, the number dropped to three full-time associates, and the playground began opening at 10:30 AM and closing at 6:30 PM. As of late September, the parks department was still monitoring user levels to determine how much staffing to provide during the fall and winter.

To train the play associates, the city brought in Penny Wilson, a veteran play worker from the United Kingdom. "Her message was unleashing kids' inner potential," Rockwell says. "The most useful thing she did was getting everyone to un-

**At most playgrounds, kids who already know each other play alone.... This playground is inviting collaboration."**

—ROGER HART

derstand that they need to let the kids do what they do on their own."

The message seems to have gotten through. "If they build something, you don't say, 'Are you building a house?'" explains a play associate who declined to give her name. "We ask them: 'What are you building?'" But mostly they just let the kids do their thing.

"The hope is that the play associates will learn with the site and come up with their own ideas for other types of loose parts or other ways children can interact with the environment," Hart says. "Any attempt by the play workers to make it richer than it already is would be a tribute to the designers who made it possible for them to do that."

#### **Observations**

I visited Imagination Playground on a hot Sunday afternoon in August. The playground was full of children, most clad in

### Bringing Loose Parts to A Playground Near You

**S** DO YOU'RE INTERESTED in adding loose parts to a playground, but you don't have the budget to custom design your own materials. Lucky for you, you don't necessarily have to anymore. Imagination Playground is not just a model for other playgrounds; it is now a product as well. Anyone can go onto the Imagination Playground web site and purchase a box full of the same foam blocks and other loose parts used at the Burling Slip site. The Rockwell Group has partnered with KaBOOM! to produce Imagination Playground in a BOX and sell loose sets of foam blocks. A set of blocks can be purchased for approximately \$4,550, and the boxed sets start at \$7,600. (Neither of those amounts include shipping.)

Each system comes with 75 Imagination Playground blocks and 15 foam noodles. The boxed set also includes a number of other loose parts. For its own work, KaBOOM! generally uses two boxes at each site. Profits will go toward building playgrounds in communities that need them.

The playground manufacturer Play Core, the parent company of Gametime, is also marketing loose parts for playgrounds through a recently announced venture called Snug USA. Developed by Tim and Hattie Coppard, a brother and sister team in the United Kingdom who have spent years researching how children play, the product is also made out of durable foam, but it is more colorful and the shapes are quite different. The price for this system ranges from \$8,000 to \$21,595. Representatives of Snug say the higher-priced system will accommodate 60 children at once.

The National Lekotek Center, an independent nonprofit organization that evaluates toys for children with special needs, recently gave high marks to Snug. "I'd have to say that Snug is one of the most inclusive products I've ever seen, and we see quite a few play products throughout our organization," says Raiko Mendoza, director of business development with Lekotek. "I liked that so many of the products needed cooperation in order to build with, so we observed children of all abilities helping each other. The children could create things together, and everybody had a say as they would bring their pieces toward the finished product." Imagination Playground in a BOX has not been evaluated.

More information about these products can be found on their web sites: [www.imaginationplayground.org](http://www.imaginationplayground.org) and [www.snugplayusa.com](http://www.snugplayusa.com).



Rockwell had noted that the children were finding ways of playing that he'd never dreamed of, and I was delighted to find my own expectations were also surpassed. It turned out that the various loose parts have a variety of uses aside from building. In the water area where spray jets shoot up into the sky, children had figured out how to use the giant foam noodles, which have a hollow center, to redirect the jets and spray them at their friends. Kids floated on the foam blocks in the shallow pool, dug a giant trench filled with water in the sand area, and staged sword fights. A few built forts, but one of the simplest constructions was the most interesting to watch. A three-year-old boy was making a trail using blocks, which soon became another girl's balance beam. Before long, the two children, who had never met before, were working together on a new building project.

**No money to design your own loose parts? No problem. A new venture called Snug USA is selling colorful loose parts made out of dense foam, *above* and *below*. Rockwell Group is also selling its loose parts through a partnership with KaBOOM!**



COURTESY PLAY CORE



A seven-year-old, Emily, was eager to share what she liked about the playground. "You can make things!" she exclaimed. "You can make your own playground! It teaches us that we can work with what we have." On previous visits, she'd made "boats" in the water and a zip line, and on this day she was digging in the sand.

"My nine-year-old has gotten to the point where she hates playgrounds, and she doesn't want to go, but you can't tear her away from this one," said Suzanne Lindbergh, who was sitting in the shade under the ramp.

"I like the sand area," explained her daughter, Prudence. "It's huge, and there's this water thingy, and you can make all different kinds of stuff. We're making a dam right now. We're going to gather all the water and make it really deep and then we're going to unload the dam."

**"For about \$10,000,  
we can turn any  
playground into an  
imagination  
playground."**

—ADRIAN BENEPE

A number of playgrounds in New York have sand, but few strike the balance between sand and water so well. "At Washington Market, I have to run almost all the way across the park to get to the water," says Prudence.

The segregation of sand and water is often planned—to avoid problems with sand building up in the drains of water features. Imagination Playground has not come up with any sort of miracle solution to get around this problem. But the parks department's outlook here is inspiring—a little extra maintenance is okay if it increases the play value to neighborhood children. "If you're gonna have sand, you're just going to have to anticipate a higher level of maintenance," says Benepe. "There is a widely held belief that playing in sand is important to child development, so we're trying to provide sand play as much as we can."

Jemma Muradian, who moved to

ing the water feature, watching her three-year-old son, Armen, play in the water. "We have a lot of parks like this in Europe," she noted, "and this is the first time that I see that there's something done with a thought to a baby."

She seems particularly impressed by the blocks. "He made this," says Muradian, pointing to a meandering line of blocks. "He could be like a future architect, just because of these elements."

"These blocks are just great," Maria Ho, another parent, agrees. "I think they did a really good job in creating shapes that would inspire imagination."

The large blocks, buckets, shovels, and wheelbarrows provided were praised by many, but I made an interesting discovery while talking to parents on the playground. It turns out many parents have been bringing their own loose parts to other playgrounds for years. "A lot of times you have to bring your own stuff—buckets, shovels," says Erik Bierge, who was visiting the playground with his two-year-old daughter. "Here you don't have to bring anything because they've provided all that," Lindbergh says. "And that means you don't have to drag any sandy, wet stuff home."

The playground's proximity to a restroom was a major selling point for just about every parent I spoke with, but the amount of shade got mixed marks. While some praised the shady areas created by umbrellas and under the ramp, others wished there were more natural shade, especially in those areas where children play. "They should put trees in, because this is so hot," says Muradian. "The kids should have a little bit of shadow."

The complete lack of natural vegetation at Imagination Playground generally surprised me. As Hart notes, it seems contrary to everything that's been happening in playgrounds for the past decade.

"[New York's landmarks commission] did not want a lot of trees where the slip had been," Rockwell explains. "They wanted to encourage the landscaping to be around the perimeter. We've gone back to [the landmarks commission], and they seem to be open to adding more trees on the inside." In the meantime, there are



Umbrellas provide shade to parents visiting Imagination Playground, but the lack of natural shade and vegetation is a common criticism.

When asked what could be improved, people most commonly requested a concession stand where they could get drinks and snacks. There didn't seem to be many kids using the sound sculpture when I visited. But the comments were overwhelmingly positive. "It's just about the coolest playground going," says Lindbergh.

The city is exploring permanent imagination playgrounds in other boroughs. "Rockwell has indicated he's interested in designing another one for us," says Benepe. And the next playground probably won't cost nearly as much. "We've realized we can take the concepts of Imagination Playground and replicate them at much cheaper cost where we are not constrained by a landmark district," Benepe explains. Ten boxed sets are already touring playgrounds in all five boroughs. "For about \$10,000, we can turn any playground into an imagination playground," Benepe says.

**PROJECT CREDITS** **Owner:** New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. **Architecture/industrial design:** Rockwell Group, New York (David Rockwell, founder and CEO; Marc Hacker, strategy director; Carmen Aguilar and Barry Richards, principals in charge; Glenn Fulk, project manager/project architect; Leslie Armstrong, project manager; Mala Parikh, project architect; Sterling McMurrin and Claudia Opel, architecture project team; Car-

oline Kim, Student ASLA, Shunyi Wu, Cas Holman, and Lucinda Waite, industrial design project team). **Play consultant:** Roger A. Hart, director, Center for Human Environments and Children's Environments Research Group, the Graduate Center at City University of New York. **Playground consultant:** Susan G. Solomon, Princeton, New Jersey. **Play work consultant:** Penny Wilson, London. **Structural engineers:** Arup, New York, and Rodney D. Gibble Consulting Engineers, New York. **Civil engineer and mechanical, electrical, plumbing (MEP) engineer:** Arup, New York. **General contractor:** Trocom Construction Corporation, Maspeth, New York. **Specifications:** Construction Specifications Inc., Morganville, New Jersey. **Cost estimating:** LiRo Group, Syosset, New York. **Waterproofing consultant:** tmt Restoration Architect PC, New York.

#### Resources

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# The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES **Sunday Opinion** SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2010

## Op-Chart

DAVID ROCKWELL

### Unpacking Imagination

In an age of childhood obesity and children tethered to electronic consoles, playgrounds have rarely been more important. In an age of constrained government budgets, playgrounds have rarely been a harder sell. Fortunately, the cost of play doesn't have to be prohibitive. In creating the Imagination Playground in Lower Manhattan — a playground with lots of loose parts for children to create their own play spaces — we realized that many of the elements with the greatest value to children were inexpensive and portable. Although traditional play-

grounds can easily cost in the millions to build, boxed imagination playgrounds can be put together for under \$10,000. (Land costs not included!) The design below is one that my architecture firm has done in collaboration with the New York City Parks Department and KaBoom, a nonprofit organization. But it needn't be the only one out there. There are a lot of ways to build a playground — and a lot of communities in need of one. Let a thousand portable playgrounds bloom.

— DAVID ROCKWELL, president of the Rockwell Group

#### PLAYGROUND IN A BOX

FRONT ELEVATION      SIDE ELEVATION

OPENING DIAGRAM

#### SCHEDULE OF LOOSE PARTS

- 8 PRIMARY BLOCKS
- 4 LONG BLOCKS
- 5 LITTLE CHEESES
- 2 FLUS GEARS
- 8 FLUGS
- 2 CHUTES
- 4 STRAIGHT CHANNELS
- 5 SMALL FLUGS
- 10 BLOCKS W/ HOLE
- 10 SQUARE BLOCKS
- 2 CLOVER GEARS
- 4 SQUEAKY HINGES
- 5 NICKELS
- 2 ARCH CHUTES
- 4 BENT CHANNELS
- WATER
- WONKY CART
- SAND

#### DISTRIBUTION & LOCATIONS

#### ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

#### FOUND PARTS (ADD YOUR OWN)

- CARDBOARD TUBES
- PVC PIPES & ELBOWS

#### SPECIFICATIONS

WEIGHT: 825 lbs

LOAD-BEARING CAPACITY: 1000 lbs

MINIMUM AREA EA. BOX: 10' X 10'

MINIMUM PLAY AREA: 225 sq ft

MATERIALS/BOX:  
POWDER-COATED STEEL FRAME AND HIGH-DENSITY POLYETHYLENE PANELS

MATERIALS/BLOCKS:  
BIODEGRADABLE CROSS-LINKED POLYETHYLENE FOAM

A - 1

**BLUEPRINT FOR A NEW PLAYGROUND**

DATE 9-26-10	DRAWN BY: JA, HG	APPR. BY: DR, MH
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David Rockwell is the president of the Rockwell Group, an architecture and design firm. Illustration by Jamie Akers/Rockwell Group.



OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

## STATE OF PLAY

*How tot lots became places to build children's brains.*

BY REBECCA MEAD

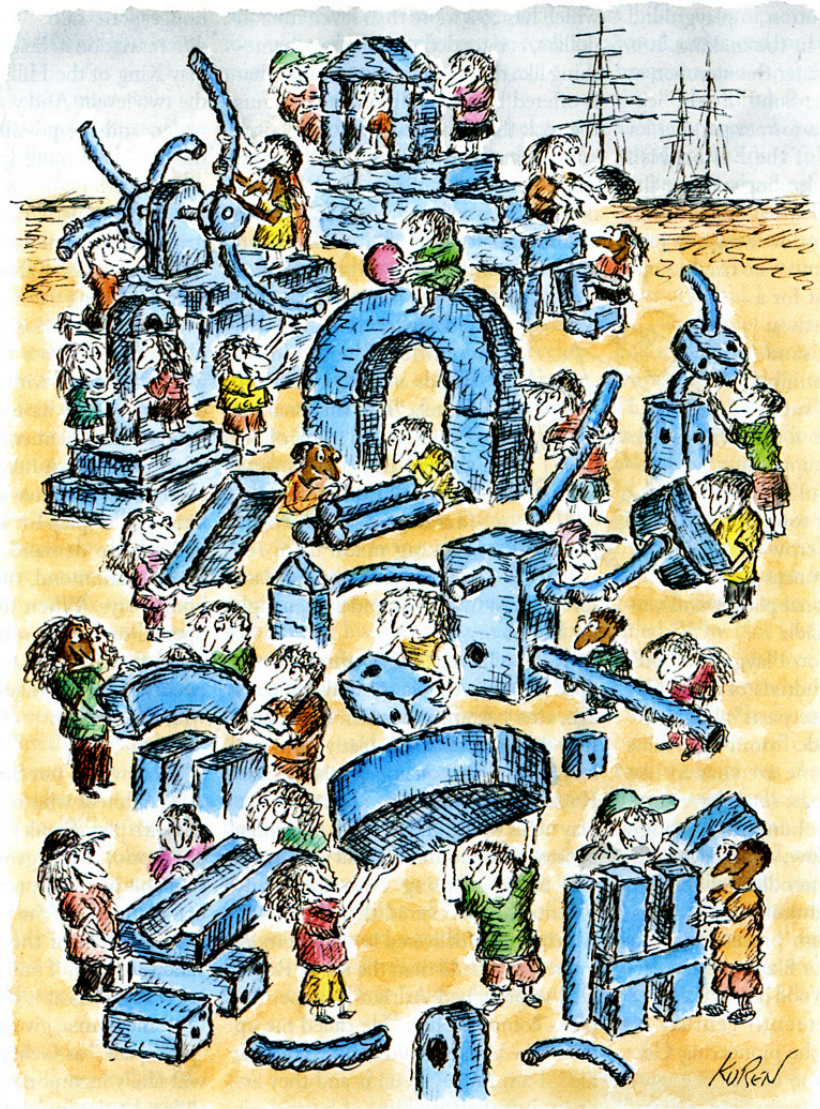
Heavy rain was falling on the day, in October, 1903, that the first municipal playground in New York opened, in Seward Park, on the Lower East Side; but poor weather hardly dampened the enthusiasm of the park's young constituents. By 2 P.M., when the opening ceremony was scheduled to begin, twenty thousand children had swarmed the playground and its surrounding streets, climbing on rooftops and fire escapes for a better view of the seesaws, swings, and sandboxes. When a car ferrying Mayor Seth Low and his Commissioner of Parks, W. R. Wilcox, arrived, children started clambering over that, too. Eventually, the kids stormed the park gates, overwhelming two hundred police officers who were trying to keep order. "They swept around and through the policemen, and, without pausing, leaped over the iron fence about the playground," the *Times* reported the next day. The program for the afternoon was quickly revised: a gymnastics display was postponed, and Jacob Riis, who had been scheduled to give a speech, demurred. ("He said that he wanted now to get the children out of the park and the rain as much as he had previously wanted to get them into it," the *Times* said.) Mayor Low did speak, although the noise of the crowd was such that only those in his immediate vicinity could hear what he had to say: "The city has come to realize that it must provide for its children, that they have a right to play as well as to work."

The Seward Park playground was largely the project of a citizens' group called the Outdoor Recreation League. Since the park's opening, more than seven hundred playgrounds have been built in New York City, and the civic belief in a child's right to play has become widely established. (Happily, the belief in a child's right to work has subsided.) The mission of the Outdoor

Recreation League was "to secure the recognition of recreation and physical exercise as necessary to the moral and physical welfare of the people," and the organization's chairman, Charles B. Stover, argued that playgrounds provided a bulwark against vice. "I am convinced that the Ghetto need not always remain a social cesspool, and among the saving and constructive forces I can count on none superior to a proper improvement of Seward Park," he said at the time of the park's creation. (Stover went on to become Commissioner of Parks.) The playground was, by all accounts, splendid: as well as gymnasium-style bars, there were bathing pools for boys and girls; and, in a touch that the current parks administration might consider emulating, rocking chairs were provided for mothers with infants.

Notwithstanding the excitement generated by the opening ceremonies, children had already been playing at that spot for years. The creation of Seward Park—bordered by Hester, Norfolk, Division, and Essex Streets—had begun, in 1898, with the demolition of three blocks of tenement buildings. Shortly afterward, construction on the park stalled, and in the interim the site was left with scattered garbage and the basements of the buildings still in place. Children, naturally, colonized the site, in ways that surely made Charles B. Stover flinch. "All through the recent Spanish-American war the boys . . . of the district converted these holes and the remaining rooms of the buildings into forts and battlefields for the purposes of a mimic war," a reporter for *The Outlook* wrote in 1900. Battles were staged across Norfolk Street, with children pretending to be American forces on one side and "Spaniards" on the other. Matters often got out of hand: in a nearby school, on Norfolk Street, "there was not a room during the school term free from

EDWARD KOEN



bruised and bandaged heads, and a good per cent of the worshipers in the neighboring Jewish synagogue bore evidences of this strife of the streets." The police were often called, and, especially when the fun extended into the night, arrests were made. As *The Outlook* reported, "Order was restored only when the Outdoor Recreation League appeared upon the scene."

The reformers' impulse to calm the unruly streets by creating a regulated play area is entirely understandable. Yet Seward Park was built not just to encourage the right sort of play but also to

quash the wrong sort of play. There, and at the many city playgrounds that were later constructed upon the same lines, physical was favored over fantasy. Exercise was more important than imagination.

Not long ago, I went to the Seward Park playground with David Rockwell, a New York architect. It was a perfect afternoon to be outside, with warm sunlight filtering through the plane trees. Even so, the park was being only lightly used. Preschoolers scrambled over the brightly colored frame-and-platform

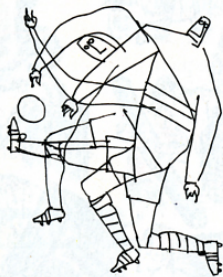
structures of the sort that are seen in almost every modern playground—a safer, but less challenging, derivative of the gymnasium bars of a century ago. A few older children scooted around a paved area that was circled with trees. "This clearing in the center is a great space, like a room," Rockwell said. It was a fairly empty room, though. Rockwell watched a girl of about three as she stood near a jungle gym, not sure what to do with herself. "The playground could use some blocks," he said.

Blocks are an essential element at the new Imagination Playground, which is

*David Rockwell's blue foam "loose parts" inspire something like the spontaneous free play that is offered by a demolition site.*



Rockwell's contribution to playground design. Five years in the making, it is scheduled to open later this summer, at Burling Slip, at the South Street Seaport. (It's built on a former parking lot that, in the time of the Fulton Fish Market, was an unloading spot for the day's catch.) Rockwell's playground has no monkey bars, or swings, or jungle gyms. It has almost no fixed equipment at all, except for a dual-level, three-thousand-square-foot sandpit; a pool with running water; four masts, ranging from eleven to fourteen feet high, equipped with ropes and pulleys; and a sixteen-foot tower in the form of a crow's nest. In a single concession to the traditional playground vernacular, there is a slide.



The Imagination Playground will, however, have hundreds of what play theorists call "loose parts": big lightweight blocks made from bright-blue molded foam. Some are shaped like cubes, bricks, or cogs; some have curving cutouts and channels, through which water can flow; some have holes into which foam noodles, of the sort that are used in swimming pools, can be inserted. The foam pieces look like giant Tinkertoys, or like oversized versions of the beechwood blocks designed in the mid-nineteenth century by Friedrich Fröbel, the pioneering German pedagogue who coined the word *Kindergarten*. The term "loose parts" was invented in 1971 by Simon Nicholson, an architect, whose parents were Ben Nicholson, the painter, and Barbara Hepworth, the sculptor. In an influential essay entitled "How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts," Nicholson wrote, "In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it."

At the Imagination Playground, the blue blocks will be augmented by other bits of playable hardware: wooden wheelbarrows, car tires, plastic barrels, and the like, with which children can build structures, vehicles, water channels, and otherwise create an environment from scratch. The playground,

which has cost more than seven million dollars, is intended to encourage something like the spontaneous free play that is offered by a demolition site—minus the rock throwing and the forcible impounding of participants. It will also be sleeker than a demolition site. Rockwell is well known for making spaces for adults that look as if they had been made for children: a Mohegan Sun casino, the interior of the JetBlue terminal at J.F.K., countless Planet Hollywoods and Nobus and W Hotels. The Imagination Playground, which is shaped like a swooping figure eight, will be surfaced with handsome decking made from reclaimed teak, and is a place for children that looks enticing enough for adults.

Rockwell, who is fifty-three, developed an interest in playgrounds ten years ago, after becoming a father. Like many first-time parents, particularly those belonging to the urban upper-middle class, Rockwell was nostalgic about the free play of his youth, and lamented the more constricted opportunities that were available to his offspring. Also, like many parents, he discovered that the box in which a toy is delivered is often of more interest to a child than the toy is. Rockwell approached Adrian Benepe, the parks commissioner. "He called me up out of the blue and said, 'I have got little kids, I am in playgrounds and they are great, but they are kind of boring—is there something different we can do?'" Benepe recalls.

Various alternative sites, including several in the outer boroughs, were considered, but Burling Slip was chosen, in part, because it had already been approved as a playground; Rockwell's design, with its masts and pulleys, alludes to the site's nautical history. One day, he showed me a scale model of the playground, which is on display at the South Street Seaport Museum, on Fulton Street. The model was surprisingly spartan, with only a few tiny kid figurines at play. "There is a multilevel space," Rockwell told me. He gestured at a raised walkway that resembled a Möbius strip. "It has a scaffolding structure, where kids can build blanket

houses," he said. "You want enough differentiation in height so that kids can play King of the Hill, and you can link the two levels. And you want sand, and water, and the possibility to combine the two." Damming up the water will be encouraged.

The loose parts are ready for deployment. In association with a play-advocacy group called Kaboom, Rockwell has been marketing them as the Imagination Playground in a Box: this summer, ten playgrounds across the five boroughs will be provided with a set each. Children's museums have acquired them, as have affluent elementary schools elsewhere in the country. "It is going to change the narrative about what is the best type of play for kids, and parents will start to demand those elements," Darell Hammond, the C.E.O. of Kaboom, says. When the boxes are first opened on a playground, it is not unusual for the boys to spend the first twenty minutes whacking one another with the noodles.

Rockwell is not the only prominent architect who is concerning himself with play. Frank Gehry is designing, pro bono, a playground for Battery Park; his plan is expected to be unveiled before the end of the year. Warrie Price, the president of the Battery Conservancy, told me, "I said, 'Frank, what you are really good at is drama and fantasy. Give me drama, give me fantasy.'" The "play space," as Gehry prefers to call it, will likely incorporate several dramatic slides. Designing slides seems irresistible to avant-garde architects; for an art show at Sudeley Castle, in England, Zaha Hadid made a sinuous fibreglass-and-rubber one that looked as though it belonged in the Batcave, and had a price tag of three hundred and forty-four thousand dollars.

An architect's enthusiasm for building unconventional forms can be particularly indulged at a playground, but there are risks. Ten years ago, a new playground in Chelsea was outfitted with tall, brightly colored plastic sculptural elements that sporadically spurt water; to many observers, they resembled sex toys. One local resident complained to the *Observer*, "I know people bring their kids here and stuff, but it's all dildos and butt plugs." The play-



ground's architect, Thomas Balsley, has denied that any such subtext had been intended.

Several of New York's most striking new playgrounds have been designed by the firm of Michael Van Valkenburgh, a landscape architect; one park, which opened at Union Square several months ago, has been almost cripplingly well attended. ("It's like Woodstock," Van Valkenburgh told me. "It's horrifying.") Many of the playground's attractions are imported from Germany, including a slanted disk upon which children can lie, in pleasurable terror, as they are spun around, and an enormous stainless-steel dome upon which they can scramble. Inevitably, there have been safety concerns: the slanted disk has been made to spin more slowly than it is designed to—American children, or their parents, are apparently unable to tolerate spinning as quickly as their German peers. Such worries were compounded when it was discovered that the metal dome can become scorchingly hot in the sun; belatedly, a sailcloth shade structure has been erected. Last week, at the new Brooklyn Bridge Park, also designed by Van Valkenburgh, similar domes were removed, following intense criticism by parents, after a little girl burned her hands. One mother who arrived with her toddler at the park, only to discover that the domes had disappeared, delivered this verdict: "Well, duh."

The main playground at Brooklyn Bridge Park includes three sculptural slides, one of them emerging from what looks like a huge wooden tepee; a vast sandlot with wooden playhouses; a luxurious water-play area constructed with glacier-tumbled boulders retrieved from gravel pits; and a hyper-realistic miniature "marshland" that features native grasses and misting machines but, thanks to the absence of standing water, lacks the mosquitoes that infest actual marshes. On the opening day, in June, the sand area was as unbearably hot as a Caribbean beach at noon, but the water area was filled with children gambolling among the boulders. (Their parents huddled in the meagre shade provided by a handful of immature trees.) Amid the mayhem, at least one child had retreated to the relative peace of the marsh, where she stood among the plantings,

reading a book and holding out the bottom of her shirt, permitting the cooling mist to float inside.

A playground has always been regarded as a place where children, by playing, learn to become non-playing adults. In 1959, the United Nations ratified its Declaration of the Rights of the Child; enshrined among them was a child's right to play. According to the resolution, the purpose of play was identical to that of education: "to develop [the child's] abilities, his individual judgment, and his sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society."

Early municipal playgrounds were equipped with what are known as the "four S's"—the swing, the sandbox, the seesaw, and the slide. This was the model championed by Robert Moses, who, during his twenty-six-year tenure as parks commissioner, oversaw the construction of the vast majority of the city's playgrounds. The *Times*, assessing the project, said that Moses had scattered "playgrounds over the congested areas of the city . . . as a sower might sow magic seed."

In mid-century Europe, a new model for playgrounds emerged. During the German occupation of Denmark, Carl Theodor Sorensen, a landscape designer, transformed a derelict site in Copenhagen into the first "junk playground." Children were provided with pieces of wood and metal, as well as with nails, hammers, and other tools, and were set free to build whatever they wanted. Contemporary photographs show preschoolers wielding full-size shovels, or hauling bits of piping and masonry. "Of all the things I have helped to realize, the junk playground is the ugliest," Sorensen later said. "Yet for me it is the best and most beautiful."

The concept spread in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom, where it was promoted by one Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a horticulturist and a children's advocate, who adopted the more salubrious term "adventure playground." In the forties and fifties in London, several such playgrounds were built at sites that had been reduced to rubble by the Blitz. A photograph in *Picture Post*, accompanying an essay by Lady Allen entitled "Why Not Use Our Bomb Sites

Like This?," showed a group of boys standing on a nearly life-size replica of a tank that they had apparently built from bits of lumber, with an old oil canister for its gun turret; close by is a towering wooden scaffold, ten times higher than anything permissible in a contemporary playground, which boys in shorts and kneesocks are ably navigating. The adventure playground, Lady Allen later wrote, is where children would have to "come to terms with the responsibilities of freedom." Playing at an adventure playground required cooperation and negotiation; through building together, the thinking went, children would learn how to resolve conflicts peacefully—unlike their parents, whose bombs had created the playground sites in the first place.

As Susan Solomon explains in her book "American Playgrounds," the European model never fully caught on in this country, although it clearly had its appeal. The première episode of "Sesame Street," which aired in November, 1969, included a sequence in which kindergarten-age kids gleefully ran through what looks like a construction site. And in the nineteen-sixties the architect Richard Dattner created, in Central Park, the Adventure Playground and the Ancient Playground, both of which drew upon the ideas of open-ended experimentation that Lady Allen had endorsed, and included tunnels, tree houses, and large sand-and-water areas. But America is the land of litigation, and by the nineties the Adventure Playground, which lies on the western edge of Central Park, in the high Sixties, had been deemed altogether too adventurous; tunnels were blocked off after parents complained of not being able to see their children at all times. During the playground's renovation, in 1997, the height of the tree house was significantly reduced.

Still, the failure of the adventure-playground movement in America should not be ascribed entirely to the excessive caution of parents. From their inception, adventure playgrounds were meant to be staffed by adults. (In 1931, Sorensen wrote, "It is possible there would have to be some supervision to prevent children fighting too wildly and to lessen the chances of injury but it is likely that such supervision will not be necessary.") Many playgrounds in Europe still have dedi-



cated play staff. Until the nineteen-sixties, playgrounds in New York were staffed by “parkies,” who provided supplies such as balls, paper, and paint, and scheduled activities for the children; but budget difficulties caused their ranks to be slashed during the nineteen-seventies, and they have never been fully restored. As a consequence, in the past several decades playground equipment has been chosen as much for its durability as for its ability to stimulate young minds. Theorists generally agree that sandboxes provide an ideal play experience, especially when a source of water is also available. But according to Geoffrey Croft, the founder of New York City Park Advocates, the number of sandboxes has dwindled from a peak of seven hundred to only fifty or so today.

The Parks Department has finally begun to address the deficiencies of its play spaces. About three years ago, the department began distributing hoses and buckets—loose parts—in some playgrounds, and each summer about a hundred temporary “playground associates” are trained to work in the parks. “It’s the whole concept of facilitating play versus directing play,” Nancy Barthold, the assistant commissioner for recreation at the Parks Department, says. “If you had blocks, directed play would be saying, ‘Why don’t you come and build a submarine?’ and facilitated play would be putting the blocks out, sitting back on the bench, seeing what the kids do with the blocks, and, if two kids get in a fight, very consciously and quietly trying to get them to work it out among themselves rather than shouting, ‘No, stop that.’”

Play workers are integral to Rockwell’s Imagination Playground, too, although critics have mocked the notion that contemporary children, so over-scheduled and hyper-parented already, would need a professional to instruct them in doing what should come naturally. “The only toxic element on a playground tends to be the adults,” Stacy Schiff wrote tartly in the *Times*. Rockwell and his collaborators hope that, once the play workers are seen in action, their function will be better understood as a corrective to parental hovering. (As Darell Hammond, of Kaboom, puts it, “The play workers’ first job is to monitor the parents, not the kids.”) Six workers at the Imagination Playground will receive training from Penny Wilson, who, for thirteen years, ran a much admired

adventure playground in London. “Play workers hold the space that is specially used for playing,” she told me. “It is a signal to other adults to take this place and this playing seriously, especially where children have been very used to having their play directed by a grownup.” Remedial help should be particularly useful in New York City, where, thanks to an abundance of organized activities and a deficit of empty space, even the most gifted young citizens are sometimes underachievers when it comes to undirected play. Not long ago, Wilson spoke to the BBC about working with a class of eight-year-olds in Manhattan, and one could detect a note of pity: “The children went completely crazy, bashing things up. They didn’t know what to do with themselves.”

In a magisterial new work, “The Evolution of Childhood,” Melvin Konner, an anthropologist at Emory University, defines play as “inefficient, partly repetitive movements in varied sequences with no apparent purpose.” Play, Konner writes, is a biological puzzle: it requires a great deal of energy, involves risk, and is apparently pointless. Nonetheless, he says, the most intelligent animals—including primates, elephants, and larger-brained birds, such as parrots—are also the most playful ones. “Research suggests that people in positive and playful moods are more open to experience and learn in better and more varied ways,” Konner writes. “The idea is that natural selection designed play to shape brain development, or as one researcher said of play-boxing kangaroo joeys, ‘Most likely they are directing their own brain assembly.’”

Over the past century, the thinking about playgrounds has evolved from figuring out how play can instill youngsters with discipline to figuring out how play can build brains by fostering creativity and independent thinking. The hope of Rockwell’s playground project is that children who have experimented with fitting together oversized blocks and cogs—and who have learned to navigate a place where the social challenges of sharing and collaboration are built into the experience—will be better equipped to handle the complexities of twenty-first-century life. Achievement-minded New York parents will likely flock to the place—expect High Line-level crowds at first. The playground may, however, inspire anxiety in those same parents,

who have spent years dutifully pushing swings, or spotting their children as they dangle from the monkey bars—only to discover that all those other playgrounds, with their absence of loose parts, have been failing to encourage the latest in brain-building play.

About four hundred and fifty various loose parts will be available for play at the Imagination Playground. By Rockwell’s estimation, there needs to be at least four or five blocks per child, otherwise amia-

ble collaboration will turn into inconsolable frustration. Roger Hart, who heads the Children’s Environments Research Group, at CUNY, and who has been a consultant on the project, told me, “When Rockwell’s playground opens, it will look like a giant work yard, in terms of the intensity with which children are playing, and the degree of seriousness that they will bring to the enterprise.”

One day in March, I went to the South Street Seaport Museum, where a Playground in a Box is currently kept for the use of visiting school groups. Outside, on Burling Slip, construction was under way: a crane was depositing a gigantic pipe, to be placed underground, and there were mountains of rubble. With the addition of a few rubber tires and some scraps of lumber, the place could have been turned, in minutes, into an excellent adventure playground.

That morning, a group of fourth graders from a Manhattan public school were visiting, and after the loose parts were unpacked in a hallway the kids set to work. A couple of girls made a low-walled enclosure out of blocks; then, plugging noodles into some cogs, they built something that looked like the Whisper-ma-Phone from Dr. Seuss’s “The Lorax,” and started talking to each other through their big blue handsets. Two other girls placed rectangular blocks on top of tubular blocks, declared that the result was a school bus, sat down on it, and, inexplicably, started rowing.

Meanwhile, a lively group of boys were building a fort against a wall—stacking the blocks one way, then the other, testing their structural soundness. A couple of boys climbed inside the fort, peeking around the entrance that they had constructed. Another clambered precariously on top, five feet up, and stuck a noodle into a cog so that it extended limply into the air: it looked like a weapon, if you showed enough imagination. Eventually, the fort fell down, but not before another boy had climbed atop





it, clutching a blue foam approximation of an Uzi, built from a cube and a tub and firing gleefully upon an unidentified enemy—the Spaniard, or perhaps the American, of today's imaginary war.

**NEWYORKER.COM/GO/OUTLOUD**

Rebecca Mead talks about playgrounds.

TIME

# Life

▣ PARENTING ▣ SPORTS ▣ HEALTH ▣ BEHAVIOR



PARENTING

## Building a Better Playground. Swings and slides don't foster much creativity. Why cities are joining the loose-parts revolution

BY HARRIET BAROVICK

I KNOW I AM SUPPOSED TO LIKE playgrounds. But my happy childhood memories of spontaneous kick-the-can games on suburban lawns make me a little wistful whenever I watch my twin 6-year-old sons in our local urban park. Sure, it's fun to swing and slide, but after a while there's not much new to glean.

Turns out, there are other parents

feeling unsatisfied by the same old playground equipment. Fortunately, one of them is the restless, preternaturally intelligent architect David Rockwell, designer of theater sets (*Hairspray*), restaurants (Nobu) and hotels (W). He was so frustrated by the fixed nature of the playgrounds his kids frequented that he set out to reinvent them. Rockwell spent five years consulting with experts on children and play, testing out his ideas at schools and

**Block party** Kids build and dismantle giant foam structures at a New York City playground

then working pro bono with New York City officials to produce a play space that does something revolutionary: instead of prescribing activities—climb this, sit on that—the water-friendly environment encourages kids to be creative, messy, constructive and, yes, even destructive as they build with and topple giant foam blocks.

Photograph by Gus Powell for TIME



**On the go** The foam blocks in the Imagination Playground in a Box were designed to keep kids' brains active. The mobile sets, which start at \$6,150, can be locked for safekeeping



### State of Play

For a tour of the new Imagination Playground with architect David Rockwell, go to [time.com/playground](http://time.com/playground)

Some of the 350 bright blue blocks at the Imagination Playground, which opened July 27 in a former parking lot in Manhattan, are shaped like wheels, others like cogs or giant noodles. The blocks can be used to make anything children can think of—a car, a river, a fort, a flower—and are deliberately big so kids will be more likely to assist each other with them.

Visitors probably won't even notice that there are no swings or seesaws. The 12,000-sq.-ft. (about 1,100 sq m) multilevel space has plenty of room for running, climbing and other gross-motor activity: ropes dangle underneath the ramps that sweep around one side of the peanut-shaped playground. But the blocks and other movable materials provide ample opportunity to exercise the mind as well. A giant sandpit and nearby shallow pool are not just for digging and splashing but also for utilizing pulleys, wheelbarrows, plastic pipes and other tools. A gleaming steel crow's nest with a spiral staircase offers a quiet spot from which to view the action—and doubles as a storage site for the blocks, shovels, fabrics, etc.

Rockwell's design, which was inspired in part by European "adventure playgrounds" where supervised kids can get creative with a wide variety of objects, follows the prevailing theory that free, child-initiated play is a critical component of healthy social, emotional and intellectual development. A leading missionary for that idea, Darrell Hammond—who heads the

nonprofit Kaboom!, the largest builder of playgrounds in the U.S.—was so excited by the Imagination Playground concept when it was announced in 2007 that he cold-called Rockwell to suggest they create portable versions to enhance existing play sites around the country. In 2008, two years before the opening of the New York City park, Rockwell and Hammond unveiled Imagination Playground in a Box, a walk-in-closet-size container with at least 75 foam blocks, among other components. The portable sets, which start at \$6,150, now complement play spaces in such cities as Chicago; Honolulu; Yuma, Ariz.; and Winston-Salem, N.C., and have prompted calls from several mayors eager to build permanent Imagination Playgrounds.

One additional expense is that both the portable and permanent versions need to be staffed by grownups. These so-called play associates are tasked with making sure kids use the equipment safely and, with any luck, keeping helicopter parents

from hovering too close. Associates can also help prevent people from walking off with the loose parts. New York City has a mix of public and private sources to fund the staffers, who require training and earn at least \$14.90 per hour. Other cities have relied on grants or volunteers.

To Hammond, the greater cost would be not making a priority of this sort of children's play. "We view this as the start of a movement," he says. "When kids are the experts who design, tear down and rebuild their own scenarios, when there's no right or wrong way to play, it helps them deal with everything that happens in their worlds, and it builds a foundation for healthy, active lives."

Most parents won't be thinking quite that deeply. But they seem to appreciate happy chaos when they see it. "It's good that it's messy," Molly Weinberger said recently as her two boys dug into an Imagination Playground in a Box that had been wheeled into an otherwise ordinary Manhattan park. "Not many kids now get to just go out and play with things that don't go *beep* or *boop*." Her 4-year-old had used the blocks to fashion a 4-ft.-long (1.2 m) car with oddly shaped wheels and interior seating. He inserted a noodle into a hole in the side of the vehicle, but when I caught up with him to ask what he had been pumping, he responded quickly, "Now I'm finished with that." And he was. He was busy helping another boy spray water through a window in a fort they had just made. ■

**Instead of prescribing activities, the water-friendly environment invites messy, creative play**



## RECESS, RETHOUGHT

*A host of designers is building interactive landscapes for kids to learn by having fun.*

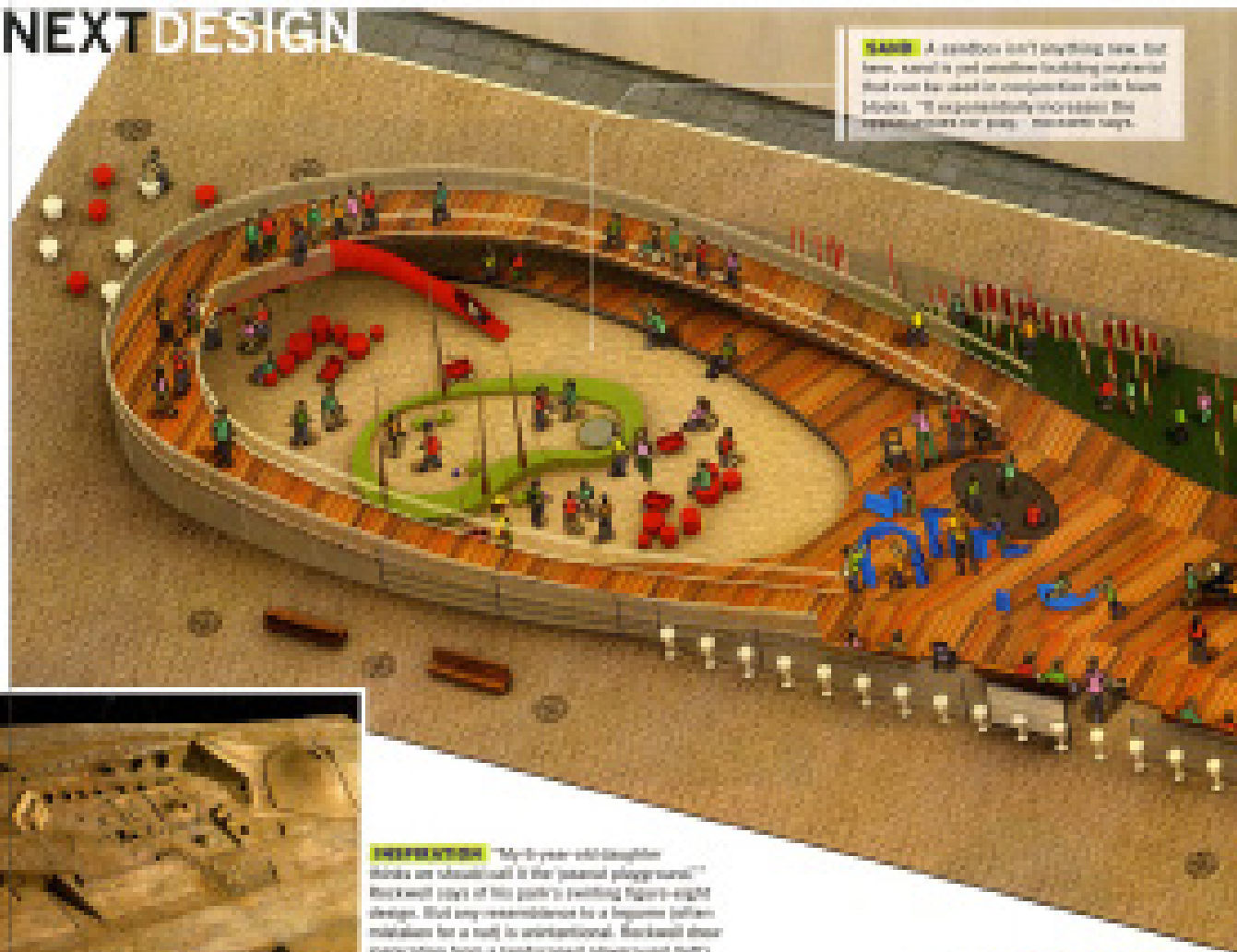
By ALISSA WALKER

WHEN MICHELLE OBAMA hoisted a hammer to show her support for a community-built playground in San Francisco last June, the gesture also symbolized a resurgence of interest in creating engaging public spaces for children. “The type of childhood that kids are having today is vastly different from just a generation ago,” says Darrel Hammond, director of play advocacy group KaBOOM!, which coordinated construction of the San Francisco playground. He’s concerned about the lack of inventiveness—what he calls “child-motivated free play”—today’s kids display. In recent years, this apprehension, along with worries over skyrocketing childhood obesity rates and a desire to create more meaningful public spaces, has led many communities and institutions to rally behind a wide range of interactive playscapes.

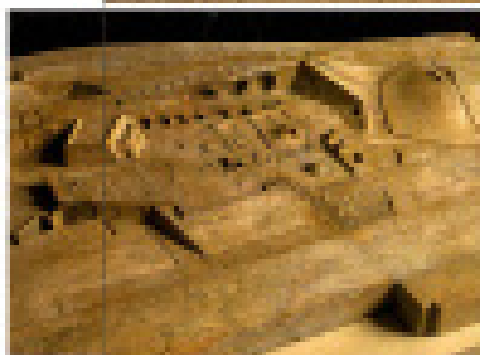
“Child-motivated play is like a twin engine when paired with physical activity,” says Hammond, expressing his hope that formal studies will soon prove what many parents already believe: Collaborative, experimental play produces smarter, more well-adjusted adults. Designers have been responding to this emerging desire for better education through play with innovative, sustainable spaces that use a mix of adventure narratives, natural elements, and nontraditional materials to nurture new forms of creative, experiential learning. ★

*Alissa Walker is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles and the author of City Walks Architecture: New York, published by Chronicle Books.*

## NEXT DESIGN



**SLAB** A sandbox isn't anything new, but here, sand is just another building material that can be used in conjunction with foam blocks. "It exponentially increases the construction play," Rockwell says.



**INSPIRATION** "My 6-year-old daughter thinks an idealized is the 'jungle playground,'" Rockwell says of his girl's favorite figure-eight design. But any resemblance to a jungle (after mistakes for a rat) is unintentional. Rockwell drew inspiration from a landscape playground built designed in the early 1980s by famed architect Louis Kahn and sculptor James Tzafariki for New York's Riverside Park. (It was never built.)

## Play Station

David Rockwell's Imagination Playground encourages creativity. Too bad it'll be just for kids. BY TIM MCCOULGH

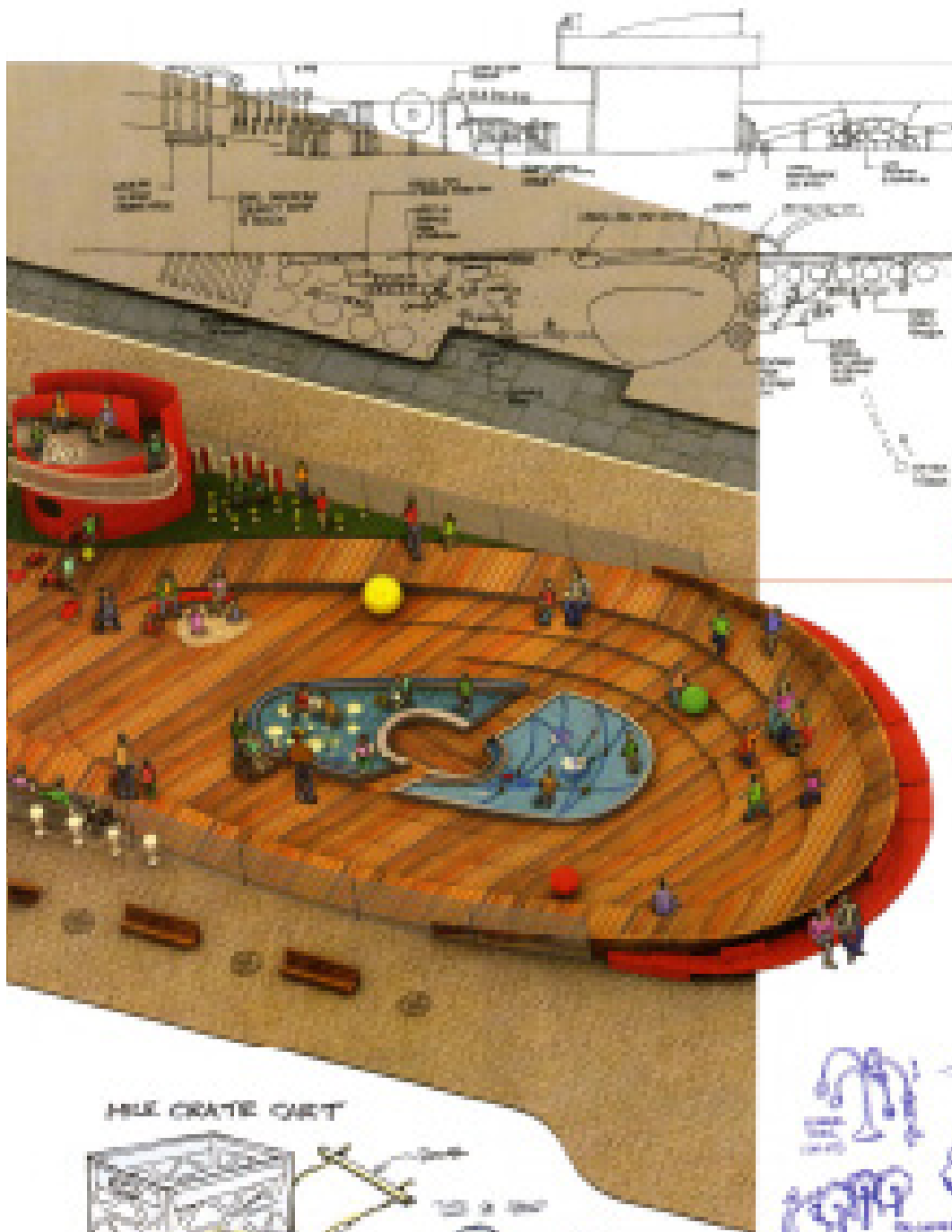
DAVID ROCKWELL STUMBLED upon his idea for a new kind of public playground after ordering a fancy art desk for his two children. "It had all these compartments, and I was very excited about it," the designer explains. "When I got home, the kids were in the hall in the cardboard box with the foam pellets. They had been playing there all day." That led Rockwell to set out, pro bono, to develop a playground that promotes free

play rather than the jungle gyms and swing sets that emphasize motor skills. The designer focused on basic elements such as building blocks, sand, water, and found objects, and updated the whole concept for the 21st century. Rather than a flat field with climbing structures, an Imagination Playground provides a multi-level play space. "It's the same thing you would have in the country with a hill or a series of rocks," he says. "It's space to explore."



**BLUE BIRD BLOCKS** The core of the playground is simple: a set of building blocks. Since the early 1970s, education has known that playing with blocks helps children develop cognitive and social skills. Rockwell's blocks, gym-resistant foam shapes are inverted and willy formed to add extra excitement.

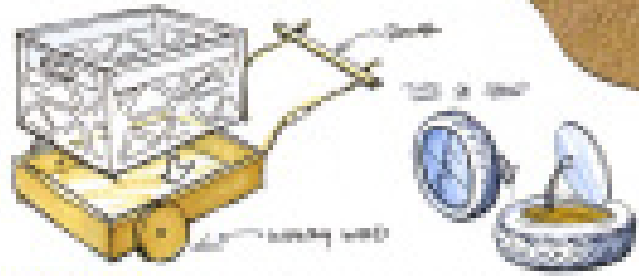
Photograph and sketches: Courtesy of the architect; Photo: Tim McCouglh



**LANDSCAPE GARDEN** A maze of holes and other elements encourages imaginative play that can spread into one of the four chess ends, and their friends can beat them on the other side of the park. The garden also includes plants that bend and turn, as well as lower structures such as fungus ponds and connective pipes that allow kids to interpret the jungle in any way they see fit.

**WATER** Bringing water for recreation and education was a top priority for the park. Running water and a shallow pool offer the next best thing to playing in a real pond or creek. Here, water can be dammed up and controlled by balls or directed to make waterfalls and sprays using the park's blocks and other natural elements.

**MILE CRATE CART**



**FROM RUBBER** Rockwell was impressed with the popularity of Adventure Playgrounds in Europe, improved play areas that first sprang up after World War II. The structures were created with whatever junk people had on hand, including tires, trees, and two-by-fours. Rockwell sought to replicate their appeal by including with crates and Ford hoodies. The park will also have scaffolding structures and drop chutes for making forts.



**ON THE MOVE** The first Imagination Playground is now under construction in Lower Manhattan and due to be completed next year. This spring, Kallman, a national nonprofit playground builder, is rolling out Imagination Playground in a box, a kit of more than 100 loose parts, for use with existing playgrounds. In addition, Kallman is scouting other locations around the country to build permanent Imagination Playgrounds.

A CULTURAL CONVERSATION | With David Rockwell

## The Architect-Designer Focuses on Child's Play

By DAN ACKMAN

**D**avid Rockwell, the founder of CEO of Rockwell Group, a Manhattan-based architectural firm, is best known for his work designing theaters, such as the Kodak in Los Angeles (come to the Oscars); high-end restaurants, such as the various Nobus around the world; and Broadway stage sets, including those for "Hairspray." "Legally Blonde" and the coming "catch Me if You Can." Now the designer of grown-up amusement parks is focusing on child's play and children's playgrounds.

Last month, he and his firm will break ground on the Imagination Playground at South Street Seaport's Burling Slip. Funded by private donations and the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, it will feature slides and jungle gyms and instead employ an open multi-level space with large sand and water features, fountains, cables, poles and an array of "loose parts"—toys and tools that kids can use to alter the environment. And on July 9 the architect and KaBOOM!—a not-for-profit playground builder—unveiled, in the Brownsville sec-

tion of Brooklyn, his first playground-in-a-box—a collection of large toys and playthings crafted from molded foam and plastic. (It will be open through Labor Day at the Brownsville Recreation Center.) These portable sets of building toys are designed to encourage more creative and collaborative play than traditional post-and-platform sets.

Mr. Rockwell, 51, started looking at playgrounds after working on three post-9/11 projects in Lower Manhattan.

*His interest grew out of his desire to build public and collaborative spaces. The results: the playground-in-a-box and a project slated for Manhattan's Burling Slip.*

The first two—renovations of a public school and an observation platform at Ground Zero—were quickly completed. The third, a downtown cultural "incubator," was a study in discord that never got built.

"In a moment of incredible frustration, I said to Mark Hacker: 'You know, we should have just... built a playground here.'" When Mr. Hacker, an executive at Rockwell Group, asked what kind, Mr. Rockwell had the inkling of an answer.

Working around the same time, Louis Kahn and the sculptor Isamu Noguchi joined forces on a playground design for Riverside Park. Though the Kahn-Noguchi design was never built, its use of a sculptural environment was influential to Mr. Rockwell.

After the mid-1960s, the energy that infused playground design eroded. Mr. Rockwell says. Recently there has been a revival in New York alone, innovative designs have been executed in Battery Park City, the Hudson River Park and at the northern end of Central Park.

Mr. Rockwell says his interest in playgrounds grew out of his desire to build public and collaborative spaces. "The city, which is this very neat Cartesian grid from the air, when you get down on the ground you realize what makes the city great is the pockets of public space where people mix together."

Not one to wait for the phone to ring, Mr. Rockwell started pitching his idea and found a willing partner in Adrian Benepe, the city's parks commissioner. Originally, Mr. Rockwell planned to build a playground in every borough, but he scaled back to focus on the flagship Burling Slip site, (its eventual \$4 million price tag, which includes site preparation, was boosted considerably by the Seaport area's landmark status, which makes the approval process quite costly.) The project is slated to be finished in 12 months.

Starting with his own kids, Kahn and Noguchi in mind, Mr. Rockwell asked himself: "What are the ingredients that allow creativity to happen? If you want to create a place that in ad-



PHOTO: JEFFREY M. HARRIS

dition to building gross motor skill also builds the ability to think and collaborate, what would those things be?"

As the project progressed, Mr. Rockwell took advice from the education establishment. "Everyone has a lot to say about how kids play," he says. His role was not to prescribe activities but to offer possibilities," he says. At the end of the day, the best ideas came from kids themselves. "Invariably the kids build their own thing and then start looking at someone else's thing and figure out how to link them," Mr. Rockwell says. The boxes include over 100 cast-foam building objects—some existing materials such as the "noodles" used as pool floats, others designed by the Rockwell Group—as well as portable sandboxes and fountains. The box the playground comes in is itself part of the fun. "We like things that open up. We like packages that open up," Mr. Rockwell says. "There is a circus coming to town."

Darrell Hammond—CEO of KaBOOM!—says there is strong interest from other cities in building

ing an Imagination Playground. While none have begun construction yet, Mr. Hammond says at least a couple should be finished in the next 18 to 24 months. Over five years, he anticipates 1,000 being built. Mr. Rockwell's idea may have even greater influence through the box sets. Two small boxes (each one 12 feet by 8 feet by 10 feet and fully portable) should sell for between \$10,000 and \$20,000, Mr. Rockwell says, an affordable price for schools and community centers, though they will need to assign staff to supervise the packing and unpacking of the toys.

The architect says that working with a private company to raise funds and supervise construction would allow the Imagination Playground ideas (whether constructed or in a box) to spread more readily, certainly, the interest is there. "Every organization in the city I know has asked for a playground," Mr. Rockwell says. "It's amazing how many people need playgrounds."

Mr. Ackman, based in Jersey City, N.J., writes about firms, business and sports.

### An Invitation to Child's Play: Big Blocks and Wheelbarrows

By DIANE CARDWELL

It is the playground of the future, already in beta mode in New York City and coming soon to empty lots, day care centers and even suburban backyards across the country.

Instead of monkey bars and jungle gyms, there are blue and white blocks to stack into high walls or to connect as sluices and walkways.

In place of swing sets and seesaws, there are wheelbarrows and rolling carts to move materials about.

And while there are still the familiar elements of sand and water, they are no longer there to be shoveled and splashed so much as turned into landscapes of fanciful design.

The idea began with the architect David Rockwell's desire to create a more engaging play space for his children — and others — on a parking lot near the South Street Seaport in Lower Manhattan. Construction of that playground is to begin in July. But the concept has expanded to include portable collections of Mr. Rockwell's play gear that can be used in playgrounds around the city, starting with one in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn this summer.

Next, Mr. Rockwell plans to bring his novel approach to cities around the nation through a partnership with the nonprofit playground developer Kaboom.

"Play is on the decline in the United States, and frankly, kids' creativity is on the decline in the United States," said Darell Hammond, the founder of Kaboom, which is working with Mr. Rockwell to manufacture and distribute the custom-designed loose parts, which experts say encourage more imaginative, child-directed play than fixed structures do. "We're betting our future on this concept, that this concept is going to — in generations or decades — make better kids."

A few years ago, Mr. Rockwell, best known for his festive designs for theatrical sets, hotels and restaurants like Nobu and Emeril's, decided to create what he considered a more inviting play space in Lower Manhattan, where he lives. In partnership with the Department of Parks and Recreation, he developed plans for a figure-8-shaped playground at Burling Slip that would feature molded foam blocks, ramps, water and sand along with trained "play associates" to look after the parts and help the children interact with them.

Mr. Rockwell called the space Imagination Playground, although, he said recently, his daughter, Lola, 6, thought it should be Peanut Playground, given



ROCKWELL GROUP

An artist's rendering of a playground, designed by the architect David Rockwell, that is planned for Brownsville, Brooklyn.

### Inviting Child's Play With Blocks and Carts

the shape. (It will be completed in the summer of 2009.)

Since Mr. Rockwell also wanted to replicate the idea in all five boroughs, he designed the portable version, which is to open in a Brownsville playground on Linden Boulevard this summer.

"It turned out to be more complicated

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#### ONLINE: VIDEO

A look at the testing of the portable version of the Imagination Playground at New York City schools:

[nytimes.com/nyregion](http://nytimes.com/nyregion)

ed than we knew to get just one built," Mr. Rockwell said, referring to a variety of technical obstacles in designing the Burling Slip playground. "So we started to think about, O.K., can we take Imagination Playground and scale it back, so you could have Imagination Playground essentially in a box?"

He created two portable versions, one that indeed fits in a box and one that fits in a trailer; they can be set up in parks and playgrounds but also in day care centers and schools and at special events. At the same time, Mr. Rockwell and Mr. Hammond are in talks with other cities to build permanent "destination" playgrounds like Burling Slip, hoping to bring the kits to smaller communities around the country.

For Kaboom, the project is a natural extension of its work providing play equipment across the country to reach a goal of having

every child within walking distance of a special play place. Details on the manufacturing and selling of the equipment are still being worked out, Mr. Rockwell and Mr. Hammond said, but profits will go back to Kaboom and the New York City parks department to support the Imagination Playground project.

Cynthia J. Gentry, chairwoman of the Atlanta Taskforce on Play, said she would love to bring a destination playground and the portable sets to her city, where she said 18 elementary schools were without playgrounds.

"The flexibility that those play boxes provide is extraordinary, plus the whole loose parts concept I love," she said. "You've got a new place every time you go. They can make their own thing there. I just think it's a crime that kids are not building forts anymore."

In New York, the parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe, said that if all went well in Brownsville, he expected to bring the kits to playgrounds and schools elsewhere in the city.

"You don't have to have a specially built playground — you have this rolling box that's almost like a magician's chest of loose parts," he said, adding that the gear created the chemistry necessary to encourage collective play.

"It's amazing to see the kids interact with the things," he said. "Because not all kids want to run around the playground. A lot of kids want to do a more sedate ac-

tivity, and there's a limited ability for kids to do cooperative games in a playground because they're full of all those purpose-built, gross-motor-skills play equipment for climbing and jumping and sliding on."

Ultimately, Mr. Rockwell said, part of the appeal of the portable sets was that they could work in tandem with existing playgrounds. The box, he said, allows the parks department "to really celebrate the idea of things really moving around, and if you link it with schools, you already have all the infrastructure."

Over the months, Mr. Rockwell and his design team have refined the parts themselves, making them larger and adding more holes after seeing how children responded to them in play sessions arranged at city schools. There are now blocks, curved elements and pieces shaped like four-leaf clovers that can be stacked, aligned and connected with flexible tubing in myriad ways.

Mr. Rockwell is still testing the forms, which will be on display for children to play with at the New York Hall of Science in Queens on June 28 and 29. Within five years, however, he and Mr. Hammond expect to see them in thousands of play spaces.

"This is an idea that can add to getting kids to play longer and play harder and demand to come back more frequently," Mr. Hammond said. "There's only one way to go down a slide. There's a whole bunch of ways to build this."



# The New York Times

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 10, 2007

## New York Tries to Think Outside the Sandbox

By DIANE CARDWELL

New York City, with its rich history of public playgrounds, is on the verge of a bold experiment in the way children play, one that could accelerate the trend away from monkey bars, swings and seesaws used by generations of city children.

In an unusual public-private partnership, the city is developing a playground near the South Street Seaport that will have trained "play workers" on hand to help children interact with features of the new playground: water, ramps, sand and specially designed objects meant to spur the imagination.

The concept is not just another accouterment for Manhattan's pampered toddler set. Rather, city officials say, it reflects the latest thinking about child-rearing. They hope the new playground concept will be replicated across the five boroughs and that it will serve as an inspiration for other cities.

"This is a very exciting idea in its physical presentation and its potential to change the way we think of playgrounds," said the city's parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe, adding that it could "once again put New York City on the cutting edge of playground design and development."

Based on child-development theories that children need to engage in social and fantasy play rather than just build physical skills, the project was conceived and is being designed at no charge by David Rockwell, fa-



Kinnaresh Mistry and the Rockwell Group

A designer's rendering of the proposed Lower Manhattan playground.

mous for creating adult play spaces like the restaurants Nobu and Café Gray and the Mohegan Sun casino and resort.

Although the space is to be open to the public, the play workers, a concept already popular in Europe, are being financed by Mr. Rockwell, who is raising \$2 million privately to cover the costs.

The American playground of swing sets and steel monkey bars has already been evolving with more imaginative features in recent years. But behaviorists and others say planners could go even further to reflect

more refined ideas about nurturing children, especially those younger than 12.

"Very little time is spent by kids in playgrounds if they have a choice," said Roger Hart, who has been consulting with the Rockwell Group and the city in developing the play-

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# The New York Times

## The Metro Section

### City Tries to Think Outside the Sandbox With New Lower Manhattan Playground

Continued From Page A1

ground. He is also a director of the Children's Environments Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. "They limit the repertoire of play to children's physical activity," instead of encouraging the kind of social, sensory, interactive and individual/freestyle play that children need, Mr. Hart said.

Once upon a time, parents took their children to city playgrounds to push them endlessly in swings or watch them hang from monkey bars (since removed; too dangerous) or let them struggle with the rudiments of sharing shovels in a sandbox. And both parent and child felt they were doing pretty well.

The new playground, however, aims to do better: "Developers of this Lower Manhattan project envision groups of children collaborating, for instance, loading containers with sand, bolting them up with pulleys and then lowering them down to winners waiting to be wheeled off to another part of the park.

What may sound like a training ground for tiny construction workers actually holds huge developmental benefits, backers say. "You have a level of interaction that you would never have with fixed parts," Mr. Hart said.

The project would transform a parking lot at Baring Slip in the South Street Seaport Historic District, an area that has few playgrounds and is increasingly attractive to residents with children. The plan has already won the support of city and state elected officials and community leaders.

Although it still needs approval from the Landmarks Preservation Commission, that appears likely to be granted, paving the way for completion sometime next year. At a hearing yesterday, several commissioners spoke in its favor, and the chairman, Robert B. Tierney, said he thought there was a "broad consensus for approval."

**The plan is to create opportunities for 'collaborative play,' the designer said.**

The idea has the support of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. Parks officials are devising plans to supply those who already work in other playgrounds with the loose objects, which range from foam blocks and cardboard tubes to spindles and bur-top bags, and train them to encourage children to play with them. And in a classic Bloombergian touch, the city hopes that if the idea catches on elsewhere, it could market the playground products.

Mr. Rockwell, the designer, acknowledged that there were plenty of great play spaces in the city, and he and his team designed their playground as a complement to those that already exist. Still, he said, watching his children, 4 and 7, play inspired him to create something based more on the imagination.

"Play is not optional for kids; play is how children learn to build com-

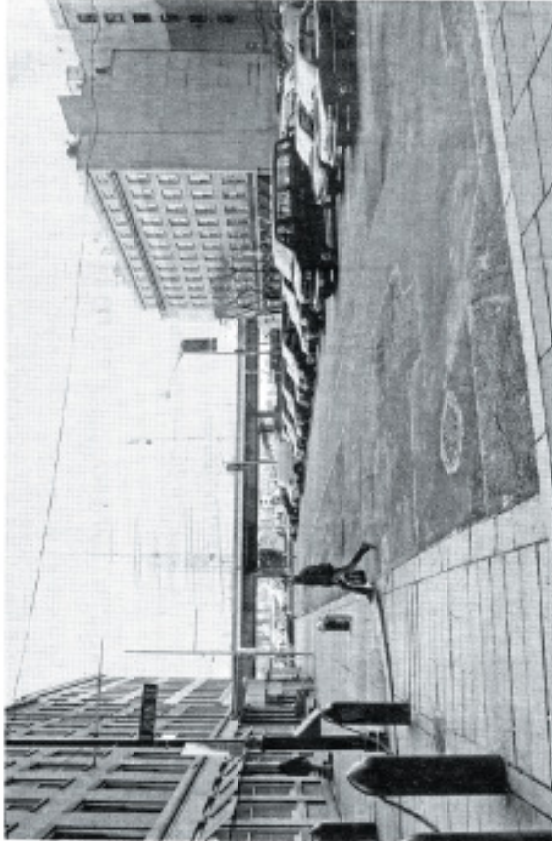


Photo Courtesy for The New York Times  
A parking lot at John Street near South Street Seaport would be turned into a playground where children could play with foam blocks, cardboard tubes and bur-top bags. It would also have pulleys and climbing nets.

worked to create spaces for children to play, Mr. Berespe said.

According to Susan G. Solomon, who wrote the book "American Playgrounds," which traces their evolution, playground design in the 1930s and '40s was borrowed from post-war Europe with the concept of the adventure playground. That idea was based on the fact that children most enjoyed building their own playthings and manipulating their own environment.

But, Ms. Solomon, who is also consulting on the new playground, said that in the '70s, concerns over injury and liability took over, and high-tech architects largely abandoned

playground design.

Now, Ms. Solomon said, the United States has fallen far behind Europe and Japan. In Great Britain, for instance, play is a government priority, with organizations dedicated to research, training and oversight of play workers and the development of play programs.

What the Rockwell Group has proposed for Lower Manhattan is a five-acre-eight-shape landscape, with sloping wooden ramps for running that connect a zone of sand to a zone of water. A structure would house the loose parts, including foam blocks, small boats and collections of tubing, elbows and gaskets for construction

projects, all to be maintained and overseen by the play workers.

The design also calls for a system of pulleys and ropes for children to lift and transport objects, as well as a climbing net and shading sails that relate to the area's maritime history and setting.

"We're creating as many opportunities as we can for collaborative play — thinking of imagination as important as muscle as running," Mr. Rockwell said, as well as places that children can be in and manipulate as they wish, with the loose objects encouraging them "to understand that they can control their own environment."