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IMMEDIATE
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Blocks, knocks & play that rocks

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

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THERE'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"



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



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.

DAVID'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

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

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.

The merits of such free play have long been recognised. In 1943, Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sorensen opened his groundbreaking play space, Skråmmelegepladsen, 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



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.

ONE 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, fairies in dens – an exciting backdrop can help your child realise his favourite fantasy roles.
- **Water play** Trickled 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? ■