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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. Willcox, 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



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, phys ed 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 sand-pit; 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.

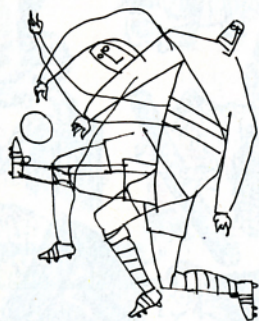
Various alternative sites, including several in the outer boroughs, were considered, but Burling Slip was chosen, in part, because it had already been approved as a playground; Rockwell's design, with its masts and pulleys, alludes to the site's nautical history. One day, he showed me a scale model of 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 coöperation 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 overscheduled 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 tube, and firing gleefully upon an unidentifiable enemy—the Spaniard, or perhaps the American, of today’s imaginary war. ♦

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Rebecca Mead talks about playgrounds.