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## Making Work of Child's Play



It may not have been the ideal circumstances to assess a new playground—the place was bursting with politicians making speeches, and children trucked in to hear them under a blistering sun. But such is the power of politicians to make their listeners scurry for distractions, and such is the sway that simple elements such as sand and water have over children, that most everyone seemed satisfied with the results when David Rockwell's ballyhooed, \$7.5 million "Imagination Playground" at Burling Slip at the South Street Seaport officially opened to the public Tuesday morning.

I say officially because it's been five years, countless city agency hearings and probably far more deep thinking than necessary about the way children play since Mr. Rockwell,

**My favorite playground was a rock outcropping just inside Central Park's West 72nd St. entrance.**

an architect and showman whose projects include L.A.'s Kodak Theater and the World Trade Center platform, called Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe out of the blue and offered to design for the city, pro bono, a playground based around the idea of unstructured free play.

I have to confess that I'm somewhat skeptical of the concept of unstructured free play. I thought that play was, by definition, free and unstructured. Coming from a tradition of swings, jungle gyms and see-

saws, I'm also a bit defensive on the subject. Are Mr. Rockwell and Mayor Bloomberg suggesting the quality of my and my contemporaries' play was somehow inferior to those of today's children who will have access to this playground's listening forest and cascading water channel?

I also remember fondly that my favorite playground wasn't a playground at all. It was a rock outcropping down a winding path just inside Central Park's West 72nd Street entrance. Its features included three smaller outcroppings in formation that resembled, to the hyperactive mind of an average 4-year-old, horses I could mount to gallop across the prairie, round up bad guys and lasso rambunctious steer. All without a single "play associate" in sight.

That's the other thing about the Imagination Playground and several easy-to-install portable versions that have been making their way around other city playgrounds this summer: They come with trained workers to facilitate play.

"Kids don't usually need somebody..." said Eve Bianco as she watched her daughter Ali, 9, romping around the playground's crowded water feature.

"It seems like a New York thing," said her friend Cynthia Savino, whose kids were also participating in the impromptu water party as, a short distance away, the mayor, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer and other lawmakers took turns praising themselves and each other.

"I just say to my kid, 'You're a kid. Go play!'" Ms. Bianco said.

Mr. Rockwell, an affable, informal, thoughtful gentleman, has obviously spent a lot of



Children tackle the task at hand at the newly opened 'Imagination Playground' at Burling Slip near the South Street Seaport.



Allison Joyce for The Wall Street Journal (2)

time thinking about play. When asked whether the kids had done anything to trigger the geysers that shot into the air at intervals from the water feature, eliciting screams of terror and delight, he said, no, they weren't "earned spurts."

He went on to explain that the "play associate" concept originated in Europe in the '60s and suggested that one of their primary functions may turn out to be preventing the playground's "loose parts"—blue foam building blocks and shapes, and wooden

cards (after all is said and done, perhaps the thing that most distinguishes this from conventional playgrounds)—from going home with the children and their caregivers. "You can't have an open park with 350 loose parts without a parks manager," he explained sensibly.

If there's one aspect of the design that the architect may not have adequately thought through it's the role of the caregiver, especially in a city like New York. It's almost as important that the playground

appeal to the parent or baby sitter as to the child he or she is supervising. Even though the Imagination Playground boasts a crow's nest, there's not a bench to be found. Or shade, for that matter, except that provided by umbrellas stationed at intervals along an amphitheater that surrounds the water feature and where Ms. Bianco and Ms. Savino were sitting while they watched their kids. Hopefully, trees scheduled to be planted around the perimeter in the fall will eventually provide

some relief.

Mr. Benepe, the parks commissioner, said that when Mr. Rockwell called him with his offer to design a playground around slides, sandpits and cascading water channels, it resonated immediately. He said he remembered his own experiences as a child in Riverside Park's 97th Street playground.

"My favorite thing to do," he said, "was to dig canals and fill up cups from the water fountain, and the water would spill from the canals into the rivers. That was a source of inspiration for me."

As the parks commissioner spoke, some long-lost synapse sparked to life and I remembered the sandboxes of my own childhood. None of the amusements of adulthood—not sex, or drugs, or even rock and roll—can exceed the focused, productive delight of climbing into a sandbox with your pail and shovel and getting down to business. "Maybe they don't have a Central Park, but they can play with sand and water," the commissioner said of the younger denizens of the neighborhood surrounding the Seaport, and their new playground. "This can pave the way for more parks with a natural inspiration."

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