Solid as a Rock
Celeb Mom Secret Weapon:
Trainer Tracy Anderson

The Waiting Game
Surviving the Admissions Waiting List

Lazy Days of Summer
Managing Your Child's Free Time

Home Sweet Home
Take a Peek Inside Writer JILL KARGMAN'S Fabulous Digs

Bethenny Frankel
One Smart, Funny Hot Mama-To-Be!
The Future Is Now

MONKEY BARS AND SWING SETS? PASSÉ.
THE FUTURE OF PLAYGROUNDS IS NOW

A

rchitect David Rockwell might make
his living designing glamorous spaces like
the Kodak Gallery Theater or Jet
Blue’s J.F.K. terminal, but it’s his
latest project, the Imagination
Playground at Burling Slip in
South Street Seaport, that has him
acting as giddy as a schoolkid.

“I grew up in a world with
lots of sudden changes and trans-
sitions and the key creative life-
saver for me was play,” says Rockwell. “A lot of
my play consisted of making things. We had this
really dilapidated garage and that was sort of my
play laboratory where I would take doors and
handles and objects that I would find around me
and use those to create things.”

The Imagination Playground is an 18,000-
square-foot space that acts as a constantly chang-
ing village in which kids can make something,
take it apart and start over the next day. With
more than 250 custom-designed loose parts; a
sand and water station where kids can create
and destroy mud sculptures; a chalk board on
the ground that is constantly changing; and a
large amphitheater with oversize balls that kids can roll around, this
is not your everyday play space.

“I am a big fan of monkey bars
and swing sets with my kids,” says
Rockwell, who has a boy, age 10,
and a girl, 8. “But there are a lot of
them around. We thought of this
as an alternative to things that al-
ready exist.”

It was Rockwell’s experience
as a child living in Mexico that inspired him
to build an entirely new kind of play space, a
project that took him more than five years to
create. “When you look at the history of play-
grounds, it was in the mid-’60s that play equip-
ment started to get more fixed,” he says. “Part
of it was the litigious nature of the world, and
for insurance purposes. But we lost something
in the process. Look back at the adventure
playgrounds in Central Park, post–World War
II, and you will see these amazing playgrounds
built out of found stuff because that was all that
was available.”

Take the subway north to Union Square and
you will find an equally intriguing playground—the
Union Square Park Playground. The 15,000-square-
foot space features futuristic climbing structures; a
sandbox with a water-play ledge and fountain to
make mud; checkerboard flooring made of inter-
locking rubber tiles; and a stainless-steel talk tube,
where kids can stand on opposite sides of the park
and hear one another speak.

The state-of-the-art playground and its sur-
rounding landscape is the work of Matthew Urbanski, a principal at the landscape-architecture
firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates. Every
aspect of the playground, from the three distinct
outdoor “rooms” created for three different age
groups to the futuristic nature of each installa-
tion, was chosen to enhance a child’s play
experience. “We wanted to provide a complex layout
for imaginative play,” says Urbanski, who chose
Japanese cryptomeria, a skinny evergreen, over
simple planters. “This way,” he says, “kids can
imagine they are playing in a forest.” It’s all
about stretching the imagination.

—Wendy Straker Hauser

Where to Go

IMAGINATION PLAYGROUND At Burling Slip in
the South Street Seaport area of New York City.
Scheduled to open summer 2010.

UNION SQUARE PARK South of the Pavilion, on the
north side of the 16th Street Traverse, from Union
Square East to Union Square West. Open now.