A CULTURAL CONVERSATION | With David Rockwell

The Architect-Designer Focuses on Child’s Play

BY DAN ACKMAN

David 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 (home to the Oscars); high-end restaurants, such as the various Nobu around the world; and Broadway stage sets, including those for “Hairspray,” “Legally Blonde” and the coming “Catch Me If You Can.” But his interest in grown-up amusement — focusing on child’s play and children’s playgrounds — is what will get his name out there.

Next 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 play area with large sand and water features, dams, cables, pulleys 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 section 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. At that time, in 2004, Mr. Rockwell had small children and “I was noticing how my kids play and that the container in many cases was more interesting than the object,” he says. “The thing is to turn it upside down. The desire is to be involved.” Mr. Rockwell, who was raised in New Jersey suburbs and Guadalajara, Mexico, had also just read Susan Solomon’s “American Playgrounds,” a book that chronicles the demise of U.S. playground design since its flowering in the 1960s. Ms. Solomon, an art historian and consultant who later advised Mr. Rockwell, bemoaned the prevalence of “prescriptive” equipment that could be used only in limited ways. Kids would quit playing the equipment — and tire of it. “When everybody always succeeds, no one achieves anything,” Ms. Solomon says in an interview. She adds that Mr. Rockwell’s new project revives old themes, especially those of the Seaside Playground in Seaside Heights, New Jersey. The project is slated to be finished in 12 months.

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. Originating in New York Central Park, the NYC Parks & Recreation Department designed the playground to be accessible to the needs of children with special needs, and Mr. Rockwell’s team has been working on it for the past two years.

Mr. Hammond — CEO of KaBOOM! — says there is strong interest from other cities in building 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 $100,000 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 idea (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 law, business and sports.