

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 Nobus around the world; and Broadway stage sets, including those for "Hairspray," "Legally Blonde" and the coming "Catch Me if You Can." Now the designer of grown-up amusements is focusing on child's play and children's playgrounds.

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 forswear slides and jungle gyms and instead employ an open multilevel space 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 sec-

tion 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.

His interest grew out of his desire to build public and collaborative spaces. The results: the playground-in-a-box and a project slated for Manhattan's Burling Slip.

The first two—renovations of a public school and an observation platform at Ground Zero—were quickly completed. The third, a downtown cultural "incubator," was a study in discord that never got built.

"In a moment of incredible frustration, I said to Mark Hacker: 'You know, we should have just . . . built a playground here.'" When Mr. Hacker, an executive at Rockwell Group, asked what kind, Mr. Rockwell had the inkling of an answer.

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 fun 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 debasement 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 emphasis on "prescriptive" equipment that could be used only in limited ways. Kids would quickly master 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 from postwar Scandinavian playgrounds that used found materials and let children build and work together.

Mr. Rockwell is not the first distinguished architect to cater to the sandbox set. Richard Dattner designed Central Park's much beloved Adventure Playground, which opened in 1967.

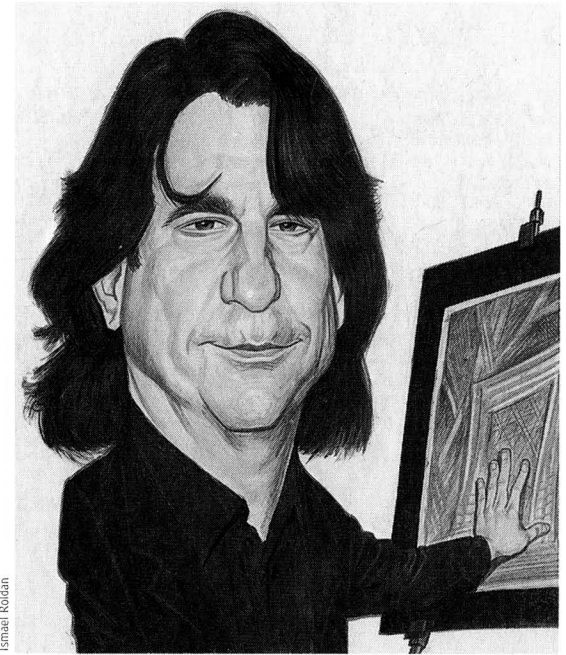
Working around the same time, Louis Kahn and the sculptor Isamu Noguchi joined forces on a playground design for Riverside Park. Though the Kahn-Noguchi design was never built, its use of a sculpted environment was influential to Mr. Rockwell.

After the mid-1960s, the energy that infused playground design eroded, Mr. Rockwell says. Recently there has been a revival. In New York alone, innovative designs have been executed in Battery Park City, the Hudson River Park and at the northern end of Central Park.

Mr. Rockwell says his interest in playgrounds grew out of his desire to build public and collaborative spaces. "The city, which is this very neat Cartesian grid from the air, when you get down on the ground you realize what makes the city great is the pockets of public space where people mix together."

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. Originally, Mr. Rockwell planned to build a playground in every borough, but he scaled back to focus on the flagship Burling Slip site. (Its eventual \$4 million price tag, which includes site preparation, was boosted considerably by the Seaport area's landmark status, which makes the approval process quite costly.) The project is slated to be finished in 12 months.

Starting with his own kids, Kahn and Noguchi in mind, Mr. Rockwell asked himself: "What are the ingredients that allow creativity to happen? If you want to create a place that in ad-



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dition to building gross motor skill also builds the ability to think and collaborate, what would those things be?"

As the project proceeded, Mr. Rockwell took advice from the education establishment. "Everyone has a lot to say about how kids play," he says. His role was not to prescribe activities but to "offer possibilities," he says. At the end of the day, the best ideas came from kids themselves. "Inevitably the kids build their own thing and then start looking at someone else's thing and figure out how to link them," Mr. Rockwell says. The boxes include over 100 cast-foam building objects—some existing materials such as the "noodles" used as pool floats, others designed by the Rockwell Group—as well as portable sandboxes and fountains. The box the playground comes in is itself part of the fun. "We like things that open up. We like packages that open up," Mr. Rockwell says. "There is a circus coming to town."

Darell Hammond—CEO of KaBOOM!—says there is strong interest from other cities in build-

ing 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 1,000 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 ideas (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.