

NEXT DESIGN

SAND A sandbox isn't anything new, but here, sand is yet another building material that can be used in conjunction with foam blocks. "It exponentially increases the opportunities for play," Rockwell says.

SOUND GARDEN A maze of tubes and other elements encourages imaginative play. Kids can speak into one of the horn-shaped ends, and their friends can hear them on the other side of the park. The garden also includes pieces that twist and turn, as well as loose accessories such as bungee cords and connector pipes that allow kids to interpret the jungle in any way they see fit.

WATER Bringing rural fun into urban and suburban areas is a recurring theme: Running water and a shallow pool offer the next best thing to playing in a real pond or creek. Here, water can be dammed up and controlled by kids, or diverted to make waterfalls and sprays using the park's blocks and other loose pieces.

INSPIRATION "My 6-year-old daughter thinks we should call it the 'peanut playground,'" Rockwell says of his park's swirling figure-eight design. But any resemblance to a legume (often mistaken for a nut) is unintentional. Rockwell drew inspiration from a landscaped playground (left) designed in the early 1960s by famed architect Louis Kahn and sculptor Isamu Noguchi for New York's Riverside Park. (It was never built.)

Play Station

David Rockwell's Imagination Playground encourages creativity. Too bad it'll be just for kids. BY TIM MCKEOUGH

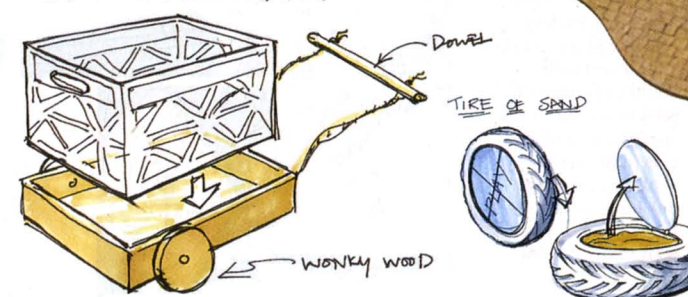
DAVID ROCKWELL STUMBLED upon his idea for a new kind of public playground after ordering a fancy art desk for his two children. "It had all these compartments, and I was very excited about it," the designer explains. "When I got home, the kids were in the hall in the cardboard box with the foam pellets. They had been playing there all day."

That led Rockwell to set out, pro bono, to develop a playground that promotes free

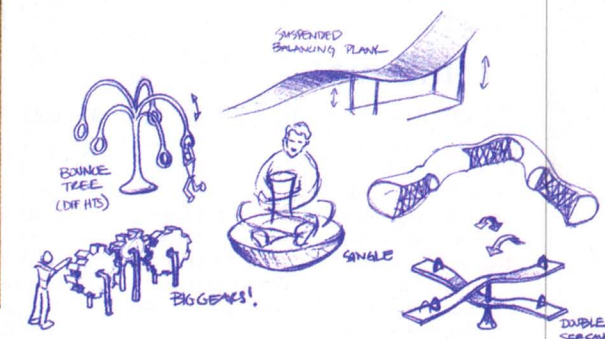
play rather than the jungle gyms and swing sets that emphasize motor skills. The designer focused on basic elements such as building blocks, sand, water, and found objects, and updated the whole concept for the 21st century. Rather than a flat field with climbing structures, an Imagination Playground provides a multilevel play space. "It's the same thing you would have in the country with a hill or a series of rocks," he says. "It's space to explore."

BUILDING BLOCKS The core of the playground is simple: a set of building blocks. Since the early 1900s, educators have known that playing with blocks helps children develop cognitive and social skills. Rockwell's dense, germ-resistant foam shapes are oversized and oddly formed to add extra excitement.

MILK CRATE CART



FOUND OBJECTS Rockwell was impressed with the popularity of Adventure Playgrounds in Europe, improvised play areas that first sprang up after World War II. The structures were created with whatever junk people had on hand, including tarps, tires, and two-by-fours. Rockwell sought to replicate their appeal by including milk crates and Pool Noodles. The park will also have scaffolding structures and drop cloths for making forts.



ON THE MOVE The first Imagination Playground is now under construction in Lower Manhattan and due to be completed next year. This spring, KaBoom, a national nonprofit playground builder, is rolling out Imagination Playground in a Box, a kit of more than 150 loose parts, for use with existing playgrounds. In addition, KaBoom is scouting other locations around the country to build permanent Imagination Playgrounds.

Renderings and sketches: Courtesy of the Rockwell Group.
Photograph: TalismanPHOTO