

# INTERIOR DESIGN

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new york: in living color



## his inner child

David Rockwell's imagination breaks loose with a playground at South Street Seaport

**Top, from left:** The Rockwell Group brings a pile-driver to a former parking lot to establish the foundation for the ramp through the Imagination Playground. Constructed in Brooklyn, the tubular-steel frame of the Crow's Nest stands 16 feet high. In Philadelphia, the Listening Forest's cast-iron pipes await coats of polyurethane paint.

**"Is he an adult or a child?"** grandmother Wendy Kantor wonders. She's watching David Rockwell and her granddaughter, who gives her age as 4½, build a structure out of royal-blue foam blocks. It's a Monday morning in August, and the *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member is visiting his pro bono Imagination Playground en route to his day job at the Rockwell Group, where he's currently working on a Danny Meyer restaurant for the Whitney Museum of American Art and sets for *A Free Man of Color*, a John Guare play at Lincoln Center Theater.

Rockwell's playground, a passion project he calls "the most satisfying of my career," germinated over a five-year period. Seeds were planted when he found himself concerned over the state of the tot lots where he was taking his own son and daughter. After studying Louis Kahn and Isamu Noguchi's 1960's playground proposal for Riverside Park and Europe's aptly named Adventure Playgrounds, Rockwell decided to eschew the usual jungle gyms and swing sets in favor of the "loose parts," sand pits, and

water elements that encourage unstructured play addressing both body and brains. He simultaneously began cold-calling the city elites he befriends through his paid work. "David literally contacted me and said, 'Can we talk about a new paradigm in playground design?'" New York City Department of Parks & Recreation Commissioner Adrian Benepe reports. Fortuitously, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation had already earmarked a parking lot across from South Street Seaport to become a playground.



**Center, from left:** The ramp's steel base is installed. The Crow's Nest is prepared for its barge trip across the East River. A crane lifts the Crow's Nest from the barge to a dock near the playground site. **Bottom:** Douglas fir masts offer pulleys to move canvas bags of sand for the construction of some serious castles.



About 200 sketches later, Rockwell had outlined a site plan shaped like an infinity symbol. It contains the Aquatheater, a series of wading pools; the Listening Forest and the larger Whispering Forest, both built from red-painted cast-iron pipe; and the Crow's Nest, a red-painted steel cylinder with stairs curving up to a lookout platform. Squishy green matting, which flows around the Crow's Nest and the two Forests, is said to be Mayor Michael Bloomberg's favorite part. —*Nicholas Tamarin*

**FROM FRONT VITRITURF:** MATTING. **THROUGH TERRAMAI:** DECKING. **GRANITE IMPORTERS:** CHANNEL MATERIAL. **M.H. STALLMAN COMPANY:** CUSTOM BLOCKS. **GREENCORNER:** UMBRELLAS. **THROUGHOUT TMT RESTORATION ARCHITECT:** WATERPROOFING CONSULTANT. **CONSTRUCTION SPECIFICATIONS:** SPECIFICATIONS CONSULTANT. **LIRO GROUP:** COST CONSULTANT. **RODNEY D. GIBBLE CONSULTING ENGINEERS:** STRUCTURAL ENGINEER. **ARUP:** CIVIL ENGINEER, MEP. **IN-CITY ENTERPRISES;** **SERRETT METAL WORKS:** METALWORK. **AMUNEAL:** METALWORK, ROPE WORK. **SHAW & TENNEY:** WOODWORK. **MODERN MODULAR;** **TROCOM:** GENERAL CONTRACTORS.



UNFOLD

*From left:* Rubber matting flows between the Whispering Forest, with its spun-steel bullhorns, and the Crow's Nest, which contains a unisex restroom and storage below the observation platform. Decking of reclaimed teak surrounds the Aquatheater, where children play with custom blocks in germ-resistant foam of cross-linked polyethylene.





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