

A Playground Where Creativity Can Run Wild

By JAVIER C. HERNANDEZ

It began as a six-foot-long robot named Simon. Then over the course of a few minutes, Kamai Pugh, 7, took Simon apart and transformed the array of blue blocks and foam noodles into a child's vision of a miniature park with swing sets, a weighing scale, a balance beam, a swimming pool and finally, a lime-green airplane.

At the Imagination Playground in a Box, no fantasy seems too far-fetched. The colorful gear, which arrived at the Brownsville Recreation Center in Brooklyn last week and will remain there through Labor Day, is designed to unleash creativity by allowing children to invent their own activities.

Instead of plummeting down slides or dangling from the monkey bars, children on Saturday built polyethylene palaces from blocks shaped like triangles, clovers, rectangles and cylinders.

They became instant abstractionists, using sturdy brushes to mix heaps of wet sand with colored chalk on the cement. And the urban planners-in-training among them took turns toying with hoses and blocks to create water irrigation systems.

The Brownsville play center gave children a taste of what the

architect David Rockwell hopes will revolutionize playground design. Mr. Rockwell, who designed the playground, brought his portable, neon-painted toy chests to Brownsville in partnership with the parks department. In the fall of 2009, a 15,000-square-foot, figure-eight-shaped permanent Imagination Playground is scheduled to open at Burling Slip in Lower Manhattan.

Mr. Rockwell hopes that eventually, with the help of the nonprofit playground developer Kaboom, his playgrounds will be replicated across the country. "I think we're living in this highly technological, highly programmed world," Mr. Rockwell said in a telephone interview. "This kind of low-tech, hands-on creative freedom is incredibly empowering for kids."

The portable playground in Brownsville, which included about 150 pieces — the largest about three feet long, and none weighing more than a pound or so — earned high marks from children, though they said it should complement, not replace, jungle gyms.

The children said they liked creating their own foam worlds and being able to tear them down on a whim and start anew. They also appreciated the cushiony

feel of the pieces, which prevented scrapes and, they said, removed any shred of guilt from pounding each other with the noodles in gladiator-style fights.

Sitting on her green airplane, Kamai Pugh said she liked to play with other children to create clubhouses — one for the boys and one for the girls. She said that she wanted to be a fashion designer one day and that the playground helped her explore her creative side.

"I like to draw, and I like to sew," she said. "This helps me be a designer so I can be on TV and have the best design."

Kamai's mother, Karen Pugh, said she was surprised at the camaraderie the children developed by working together. "As a mother, you know what intrigues your child's mind," Ms. Pugh said. "These things really seem to help her create and to gear minds toward thinking about new possibilities."

Another parent, Preme Brewster, said the play gear was attractive even to adults, who can use it for exercise or perhaps build alongside the children.

"It's so bright, you want to pick it up and play with it yourself," Ms. Brewster said.

About 40 children have come to the new playground each day

since it opened last Wednesday, and word is slowly trickling through the neighborhood, said a playground supervisor, Jamaal Pinckney, 27.

Mr. Pinckney, who lives in Brooklyn, said the playground was particularly welcome in a neighborhood that had struggled with violence and drugs and what he called a "thug mentality" among young people.

"They have a chance to come out here and just be free and just envision all that you can do," he said. "Here, life is unlimited."

Mr. Pinckney stood near the fence watching Rakeem Marshall, 13, and his stepbrother, Ocyrus Minto, 9, build a ramp leading to a pit of foam noodles. The two boys tested their work, backing up to the fence's edge and running up the ramp at full speed. When they both missed the target, they tweaked the design and tried again. Success.

Rakeem, who hopes to design and construct buildings when he grows up, said he thought the playground was a great place to bring his stepbrother, whose youthful energy can sometimes get out of control.

"Instead of being in the house and destroying stuff," Rakeem said, "he can be here and destroy stuff."



ROBERT STOLARIK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

In Brownsville, Brooklyn, a portable version of Imagination Playground features oversize but lightweight building blocks.