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New York Tries to Think Outside the Sandbox

By DIANE CARDWELL

New York City, with its rich history of public playgrounds, is on the verge of a bold experiment in the way children play, one that could accelerate the trend away from monkey bars, swings and seesaws used by generations of city children.

In an unusual public-private partnership, the city is developing a playground near the South Street Seaport that will have trained “play workers” on hand to help children interact with features of the new playground: water, ramps, sand and specially designed objects meant to spur the imagination.

The concept is not just another ac-couterment for Manhattan’s pampered toddler set. Rather, city officials say, it reflects the latest thinking about child-rearing. They hope the new playground concept will be replicated across the five boroughs and that it will serve as an inspiration for other cities.

“This is a very exciting idea in its physical presentation and its potential to change the way we think of playgrounds,” said the city’s parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe, adding that it could “once again put New York City on the cutting edge of playground design and development.”

Based on child-development theories that children need to engage in social and fantasy play rather than just build physical skills, the project was conceived and is being designed at no charge by David Rockwell, fa-



Kinnaresh Mistry and the Rockwell Group

A designer's rendering of the proposed Lower Manhattan playground.

mous for creating adult play spaces like the restaurants Nobu and Café Gray and the Mohegan Sun casino and resort.

Although the space is to be open to the public, the play workers, a concept already popular in Europe, are being financed by Mr. Rockwell, who is raising \$2 million privately to cover the costs.

The American playground of swing sets and steel monkey bars has already been evolving with more imaginative features in recent years. But behaviorists and others say planners could go even further to reflect

more refined ideas about nurturing children, especially those younger than 12.

“Very little time is spent by kids in playgrounds if they have a choice,” said Roger Hart, who has been consulting with the Rockwell Group and the city in developing the play-

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The Metro Section

City Tries to Think Outside the Sandbox With New Lower Manhattan Playground

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ground. He is also a director of the Children's Environments Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. "They limit the repertoire of play to children's physical activity," instead of encouraging the kind of social, sensory, interactive and individual fantasy play that children need, Mr. Hart said.

Once upon a time, parents took their children to city playgrounds to push them endlessly in swings or watch them hang from monkey bars (since removed; too dangerous) or let them struggle with the rudiments of sharing shovels in a sandbox. And both parent and child felt they were doing pretty well.

The new playground, however, aims to do better: Developers of the Lower Manhattan project envision groups of children collaborating, for instance, loading containers with sand, hoisting them up with pulleys and then lowering them down to wagons waiting to be wheeled off to another part of the park.

What may sound like a training ground for tiny construction workers actually holds huge developmental benefits, backers say. "You have a level of interaction that you would never have with fixed parts," Mr. Hart said.

The project would transform a parking lot at Burling Slip in the South Street Seaport Historic District, an area that has few playgrounds and is increasingly attractive to residents with children. The plan has already won the support of city and state elected officials and community leaders.

Although it still needs approval from the Landmarks Preservation Commission, that appears likely to be granted, paving the way for completion sometime next year. At a hearing yesterday, several commissioners spoke in its favor, and the chairman, Robert B. Tierney, said he thought there was a "broad consensus for approval."

The plan is to create opportunities for 'collaborative play,' the designer said.

The idea has the support of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. Parks officials are devising plans to supply those who already work in other playgrounds with the loose objects, which range from foam blocks and cardboard tubes to spindles and burlap bags, and train them to encourage children to play with them. And in a classic Bloombergian touch, the city hopes that if the idea catches on elsewhere, it could market the playground products.

Mr. Rockwell, the designer, acknowledged that there were plenty of great play spaces in the city, and he and his team designed their playground as a complement to those that already exist. Still, he said, watching his children, 4 and 7, play inspired him to create something based more on the imagination.

"Play is not optional for kids; play is how children learn to build com-

munity, how they learn to work with other people, it's how they learn to kind of engage their sense of creativity," Mr. Rockwell said. "We thought it was a really open field to explore."

Mr. Rockwell has already developed a relationship with the city, helping to design a viewing platform over ground zero, a project for which he also helped raise private financing. After another partnership to develop theatrical spaces downtown fell through, Mr. Rockwell, who lives in Lower Manhattan, realized there was an immediate need for a playground.

Commissioner Benepe, it turned out, was an advocate for rethinking the city's playgrounds, and there was money available from both the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the Economic Development Corporation as part of larger efforts to redevelop the area.

Whether the playground experiment proves successful, and can be replicated, is an open question, educators and parents say.

Cathleen Wiggins, director of the Leadership in the Arts program at the Bank Street College of Education and the mother of a 6-year-old, was receptive to the open-ended play materials but worried that the city could wind up with something that could not be maintained because of budget constraints. And she said that traditional playgrounds had their selling points, adding that children "are creative and imaginative beings and given just about any material they are going to bring to it their notions of the world and their growing understanding of it."

The modern American playground has its roots in the late 19th century, when settlement houses in New York



Marko Georgiev for The New York Times

A parking lot at John Street near South Street Seaport would be turned into a playground where children could play with foam blocks, cardboard tubes and burlap bags. It would also have pulleys and climbing nets.

worked to create spaces for children to play, Mr. Benepe said.

According to Susan G. Solomon, who wrote the book "American Playgrounds," which traces their evolution, playground design in the 1950s and '60s was borrowed from post-war Europe with the concept of the adventure playground. That idea was based on the fact that children most enjoyed building their own playthings and manipulating their own environment.

But, Ms. Solomon, who is also consulting on the new playground, said that in the '70s, concerns over injury and liability took over, and high-ticket architects largely abandoned

playground design.

Now, Ms. Solomon said, the United States has fallen far behind Europe and Japan. In Great Britain, for instance, play is a government priority, with organizations dedicated to research, training and oversight of play workers and the development of play programs.

What the Rockwell Group has proposed for Lower Manhattan is a figure-eight-shape landscape, with sloping wooden ramps for running that connect a zone of sand to a zone of water. A structure would house the loose parts, including foam blocks, small boats and collections of tubing, elbows and gaskets for construction

projects, all to be maintained and overseen by the play workers.

The design also calls for a system of pulleys and ropes for children to lift and transport objects, as well as a climbing net and shading sails that relate to the area's maritime history and setting.

"We're creating as many opportunities as we can for collaborative play — thinking of imagination as important a muscle as running," Mr. Rockwell said, as well as places that children can be in and manipulate as they wish, with the loose objects encouraging them "to understand that they can control their own environment."