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Ideas

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BACK TO THE

PLAYGROUND

American children, overprotected and overprogrammed, have ever less time and space for play. But an eclectic collection of advocates is fighting back, designing bold new playgrounds that are manifestoes on the importance of fun.

BY DRAKE BENNETT

THE FIRST THING kids notice at Teardrop Park, the thing they talk about, at least, is the slide. Fourteen-feet tall, 28-feet long, and straight, it descends from a miniature mesa into a sand pit, allowing for luge-like speeds.

Built in 2004, Teardrop Park — an eponymously-shaped 2 acres a few blocks from Ground Zero in lower Manhattan — is a manifesto on the possibilities of a playground. Along with the slide, there's a broad lawn ending in a pocket marsh, complete with a log for balancing on. At the opposite end is a sandbox with a water spigot so young sculptors can control the consistency of their sand. There are winding paths for chases, a sprinkler for hot days, and boulders and a 25-foot-high cliff for climbing. At \$17 million, the park cost nearly 20 times what New York City spends on its average municipal playground.

"We've been to every playground downtown, and this is by far their favorite," said Claire Danese, shivering in unseasonable April cold as she watched her children Rocco, 6, and Tillie, 3, take sand to the top of the slide and dump it down — something they'd discovered made the slide even faster.

Teardrop Park is at the forefront of a playground **PLAYGROUND, D4**

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renaissance, a renewed interest in how and where children play. In recent years, noted architects have turned their attention to designing playgrounds, even as public agencies and private charities dedicated to expanding children's access to playgrounds have sprung up. David Rockwell, best known for creating pleasure palaces like the Mohegan Sun casino, has designed a next-generation space, the Imagination Playground, to be built by the end of next year on a site less than a mile from Teardrop Park, complete with an array of tools and building materials and adult "playworkers" to facilitate the proceedings. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation is in talks with architect Frank Gehry to build a Manhattan playground at a yet-to-be-determined site.

"There's a real international playground movement taking hold around the world, and it's really very exciting," says David Elkind, a professor of child development at Tufts University and author of the recently published book "The Power of Play."

Nor is it only celebrity designers and architects who are starting to take playgrounds seriously. Here in Boston, a public-private partnership called the Boston Schoolyard Initiative has over the past decade refurbished 61 of the city's schoolyards, furnishing formerly neglected spaces with play structures and greenery. Recent years have also seen the creation of nonprofits, like the MetLife Foundation Parks & Playgrounds Fund and KaBOOM!, dedicated to improving children's access to playgrounds. KaBOOM! has partnered with Home Depot and Kimberly-Clark and earned the endorsement of Senator Hillary Clinton in its mission to provide "a great place to play within walking distance of every child in America."

This pro-playground vanguard, according to the child psychologists, designers, architects, parents and teachers who form it, is motivated by the conviction that play, in a larger sense, is under attack. High-stakes testing has elbowed recess out of the school day, video games keep kids indoors and sedentary, while parents, fearful of pedophiles and abductions, no longer let children roam freely.

All in all, the average child's life is more regimented than it was 20 years ago, with more young children in day care, more lessons and rehearsals and practices, and less free time. The fact that communities are getting serious about play, proponents hope, means leaders recognize the extent to which it is endangered in modern society.

At the same time, this reexamination of playgrounds is triggered by the conviction that, in the United States in particular, playgrounds have become rather unfun — designed with only safety in mind, they've lost the capacity to excite or challenge children.

Playgrounds have always been places where the need for free, even rambunctious, play bumps up against parental fears about safety. The new playground advocates are trying to find a better balance. "The history of playgrounds," says Roger Hart, director of the Children's Environments Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, "is a history of containment."

The country's first permanent playground, in New York City's Seward Park, was built in 1903 for children from the nearby Lower East Side tenements. According to Adrian Benepe, commissioner of New York City's Department of Parks and Recreation, early American playgrounds "grew out of social workers trying to provide safe places in overcrowded slums." Tenement children played in the streets and on piers, sometimes being run over by streetcars, sometimes drowning in the East River.

But what concerned the Progressive reformers as much as children's safety, according to Roger Hart, who was also a consultant to the Imagination Playground, was the thought that by running wild in the streets, immigrant children weren't learning the sort of values that would make them



JAN STURMANN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Adventure Playground, at the Berkeley Marina in Berkeley, Calif., offers children a much more freewheeling environment than swings and monkey bars.

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JAN STURMANN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

As Hako Kaplan, 3, watches, play worker Lia Sutton, 23, helps Delia Wilson, 3, saw wood at the Adventure Playground in Berkeley.



SCOTT LEWIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Teardrop Park in New York City offers an experience closer to the luge than the tame ride of traditional slides.



ARTIST'S RENDERING/KINNARESH MISTRY AND ROCKWELL GROUP

upstanding, hard-working Americans. "There was this ideological split between those who argued that children would learn what they needed just by playing in the streets, and those who wanted to put them in playgrounds," Hart says.

The Seward Playground wasn't very different from what we think of as a playground today. With structures to swing and climb on and a running track encircling them, it served as a model for decades.

Safety concerns eventually remade the playground, according to Susan Solomon, an architectural historian and author of a history of American playgrounds. In recent decades, she argues, fear of personal injury lawsuits has shrunk the playground. Slides and swings today are lower, and therefore slower, than before. Raised platforms are girded by railings, and monkey bars are practically nonexistent. "The see-saw today," points out Solomon, "is pretty much a horizontal bar that hardly moves in either direction. It just kind of jiggles a little bit." School playgrounds in Broward County, in south Florida, now post "No Running" signs.

But even as the American playground was being tamed, the template for an alternative was emerging in Europe. In the 1930s, a Danish architect noticed that many children were ignoring the playgrounds he designed and playing in rubble-filled vacant lots instead. Turning those lots into playgrounds was simply a matter of installing an adult "playworker" to facilitate activities and make sure nothing catastrophic happened. "They were rough-and-ready, and quite anarchic places," says Wendy Russell, a lecturer in playwork at the University of Gloucestershire. Now somewhat more formalized, there are about 1,000 such playgrounds around Europe.

Today there are two adventure playgrounds in the United States, in Berkeley and Huntington Beach, Calif., and playwork remains an exotic oxymoron. What accounts for the difference in American and European perspectives on play is difficult to pinpoint, but Jeri Robinson, who runs the early childhood education program at the Boston Children's Museum, ties it to larger attitudes about leisure. "Our country as a culture plays less than others. Look at how long people have for vacation in Europe, how little we have here," she says.

Nevertheless, American playground proponents tend to see northern Europe as a model for where they'd like to see the United States go. Countries like Wales, for example, have government agencies devoted to play, in several European countries it's possible to get an advanced degree in playwork, and the far less litigious European legal climate gives playground designers far more leeway.

Projects like the Imagination Playground and Teardrop Park aim to demonstrate to American children and, more importantly, American parents that risk and imagination deserve a place in the playground. At the Imagination Playground, kids will be provided with building materials and tools they can use to collaboratively assemble and then destroy the structures they dream up. There will be water — not just for splashing in but for damming with sand to form canals and pools.

Like Teardrop, Imagination Playground will be a costly project, but, according to David Rockwell, a playground with similar basic components could be built for far less. "All you need is a landscape that has sand and water with the ability to mix the two, and loose parts — many of which are things we found — for kids to play with," he says. "It doesn't get much more basic than that."

There is evidence that the playground insurgency is spreading. "We've been overwhelmed with requests from people who are interested in seeing how these ideas would apply to their school or their neighborhood or their community," Rockwell says. Chicago's Brookfield Zoo now employs playworkers and emphasizes "free play" in certain areas — and, according to Hart, the city's children's museum is considering doing so, as well. And in the past 11 years, working with tens of thousands of volunteers and various corporate partners, the nonprofit organization KaBOOM! has built nearly 1,200 playgrounds all over North America, using a collaborative method in which local children help design the playgrounds that are going up in their neighborhoods.

According to psychologists and specialists in early childhood education, to be valuable, play needs to be creative, but there also has to be an element of danger. "Children need vertiginous experiences," says Mary Rivkin, a professor of education at the University of Maryland. "They need fast and slow and that high feeling you get when you run down a hill. They need to have tippy things."

If there's no challenge, no pain of failure, she argues, there's no learning — and less enjoyment. Indeed, according to Hart, one problem with trying to child-proof playgrounds is that children, trying to make the safer playground equipment interesting, come up with unforeseen and often more dangerous ways of using it.

Some playground advocates also point to the rise in childhood obesity and related diseases as a reason to get more kids playing, but they're careful to point out that play is not just about physical activity. "Play and sports are totally different," says Doris Bergen, a professor of educational psychology at Miami University of Ohio. "When they play, kids make their own rules — then they have to negotiate to get others to follow them. In sports, adults make and enforce the rules for them."

Ultimately, to playground proponents, playgrounds matter because play matters. Psychologists since Jean Piaget have argued for the developmental importance of child's play, but recent years have seen more attempts to provide a firmer experimental basis for these claims. Studies have shown that play helps children concentrate and that they develop social skills and self-control through it. Animal studies suggest that something in the act of playing triggers neuronal growth.

If that all happens on a playground, all the better, but, for some play theorists, it would be more encouraging if it didn't. In a culture that truly valued play, Hart argues, playgrounds would become less important, not more.

"To a young child," Hart says, "the idea of a playground is ridiculous in the first place. The whole idea of being taken to a place to play is almost an oxymoron. Children want to play everywhere."

ALL IN A DAY'S PLAY

A THE IMAGINATION PLAYGROUND (above), due to open next year in New York City, exemplifies the new ambition for playgrounds. Designed by David Rockwell, an architect best known for the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles and the Mohegan Sun casino, it will provide blocks and tools, cranes and carts for children to work with, and an area with sand and water for building dams and canals. The playground is meant to incite open-ended, imaginative, and collaborative play rather than the swinging, sliding, and climbing of a traditional playground. Adult "playworkers" will be on hand, not so much to direct the children's activity as, in the words of Roger Hart, a play expert and consultant on the project, to encourage and "set the stage" for it.

The roots for the Imagination Playground lie in European "adventure playgrounds," which grew out of the realization that children in midcentury Europe actually preferred playing in vacant lots full of rubble — they'd climb on the larger pieces and build things out of the smaller scraps — than purpose-built playgrounds. "The kids would create things out of castaway materials, they could let their imaginations go and take on a level of risk that they couldn't find in normal playgrounds," says Jeri Robinson, vice president of early childhood programs at the Boston Children's Museum.

Today there are roughly 1,000 adventure playgrounds in Europe and two in the United States. One of those, in Berkeley, Calif., is a 1-acre lot full of junk with a few climbing structures and a zip line. Kids are provided with tools and scrap wood and can build (and destroy) what they like.

—DRAKE BENNETT