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An Invitation to Child's Play: Big Blocks and Wheelbarrows

By [DIANE CARDWELL](#)

It is the playground of the future, already in beta mode in New York City and coming soon to empty lots, day care centers and even suburban backyards across the country.

Instead of monkey bars and jungle gyms, there are blue and white blocks to stack into high walls or to connect as sluices and walkways.

In place of swing sets and seesaws, there are wheelbarrows and rolling carts to move materials about.

And while there are still the familiar elements of sand and water, they are no longer there to be shoveled and splashed so much as turned into landscapes of fanciful design.

The idea began with the architect [David Rockwell](#)'s desire to create a more engaging play space for his children — and others — on a parking lot near the South Street Seaport in Lower Manhattan. Construction of that playground is to begin in July. But the concept has expanded to include portable collections of Mr. Rockwell's play gear that can be used in playgrounds around the city, starting with one in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn this summer.

Next, Mr. Rockwell plans to bring his novel approach to cities around the nation through a partnership with the nonprofit playground developer Kaboom.

"Play is on the decline in the United States, and frankly, kids' creativity is on the decline in the United States," said Darell Hammond, the founder of Kaboom, which is working with Mr. Rockwell to manufacture and distribute the custom-designed loose parts, which experts say encourage more imaginative, child-directed play than fixed structures do. "We're betting our future on this concept, that this concept is going to — in generations or decades — make better kids."

A few years ago, Mr. Rockwell, best known for his festive designs for theatrical sets, hotels and restaurants like Nobu and Emeril's, decided to create what he considered a more inviting play space in Lower Manhattan, where he lives. In partnership with the Department of Parks and Recreation, he developed plans for a figure-8-shaped playground at Burling Slip that would feature molded foam blocks, ramps, water and sand along with trained "play associates" to look after the parts and help the children interact with them.

Mr. Rockwell called the space Imagination Playground, although, he said recently, his daughter, Lola, 6, thought it should be Peanut Playground, given the shape. (It will be completed in the summer of 2009.)

Since Mr. Rockwell also wanted to replicate the idea in all five boroughs, he designed the portable version, which is to open in a Brownsville playground on Linden Boulevard this summer.

“It turned out to be more complicated than we knew to get just one built,” Mr. Rockwell said, referring to a variety of technical obstacles in designing the Burling Slip playground. “So we started to think about, O.K., can we take Imagination Playground and scale it back, so you could have Imagination Playground essentially in a box?”

He created two portable versions, one that indeed fits in a box and one that fits in a trailer; they can be set up in parks and playgrounds but also in day care centers and schools and at special events. At the same time, Mr. Rockwell and Mr. Hammond are in talks with other cities to build permanent “destination” playgrounds like Burling Slip, hoping to bring the kits to smaller communities around the country.

For Kaboom, the project is a natural extension of its work providing play equipment across the country to reach a goal of having every child within walking distance of a special play place. Details on the manufacturing and selling of the equipment are still being worked out, Mr. Rockwell and Mr. Hammond said, but profits will go back to Kaboom and the New York City parks department to support the Imagination Playground project.

Cynthia J. Gentry, chairwoman of the Atlanta Taskforce on Play, said she would love to bring a destination playground and the portable sets to her city, where she said 18 elementary schools were without playgrounds.

“The flexibility that those play boxes provide is extraordinary, plus the whole loose parts concept I love,” she said. “You’ve got a new place every time you go. They can make their own thing there. I just think it’s a crime that kids are not building forts anymore.”

In New York, the parks commissioner, [Adrian Benepe](#), said that if all went well in Brownsville, he expected to bring the kits to playgrounds and schools elsewhere in the city.

“You don’t have to have a specially built playground — you have this rolling box that’s almost like a magician’s chest of loose parts,” he said, adding that the gear created the chemistry necessary to encourage collective play.

“It’s amazing to see the kids interact with the things,” he said. “Because not all kids want to run around the playground. A lot of kids want to do a more sedate activity, and there’s a limited ability for kids to do cooperative games in a playground because they’re full of all those purpose-built, gross-motor-skills play equipment for climbing and jumping and sliding on.”

Ultimately, Mr. Rockwell said, part of the appeal of the portable sets was that they could work in tandem with existing playgrounds. The box, he said, allows the parks department “to really celebrate the idea of things really moving around, and if you link it with schools, you already have all the infrastructure.”

Over the months, Mr. Rockwell and his design team have refined the parts themselves, making them larger and adding more holes after seeing how children responded to them in play sessions arranged at city schools. There are now blocks, curved elements and pieces shaped like four-leaf clovers that can be stacked, aligned and connected with flexible tubing in myriad ways.

Mr. Rockwell is still testing the forms, which will be on display for children to play with at the New York Hall

of Science in Queens on June 28 and 29. Within five years, however, he and Mr. Hammond expect to see them in thousands of play spaces.

“This is an idea that can add to getting kids to play longer and play harder and demand to come back more frequently,” Mr. Hammond said. “There’s only one way to go down a slide. There’s a whole bunch of ways to build this.”

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