2011
RUDY BRUNER AWARD
PROJECT DATA

PROJECT DATA

Please answer questions in space provided. Answers to all questions should be typed or written directly on the forms. If the forms are not used and answers are typed on a separate page, each answer must be preceded by the question to which it responds, and the length of each answer should be limited to the area provided on the original form.

NOTE: This sheet and a selected image will be sent to the Committee in advance.

Project Name Imagination Playground at Burling Slip Location New York, NY

Owner New York City Department of Parks and Recreation

Project Use(s) Public playground

Project Size 18,000 sq. ft. Total Development Cost $9MM

Annual Operating Budget (if appropriate)

Date Initiated January 2004 Percent Completed by December 1, 2010 100%

Project Completion Date (if appropriate) July 27, 2010

Attach, if you wish, a list of relevant project dates

Application submitted by:

Name Jeffrey Ashey Title CFO

Organization Rockwell Group

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Perspective Sheets:

Organization Name Telephone/e-mail

Public Agencies New York City Department of Parks and Recreation; Nancy Barthold, Assistant Commissioner

(212) 360-3314; nancy.barthold@parks.nyc.gov

Architect/Designer Rockwell Group; David Rockwell, CEO; (212) 463-0334, mhartnick@rockwellgroup.com

Developer

Professional Consultant University of Massachusetts; George E. Forman, Emeritus Professor; (413) 256-8846,

geforman@aol.com

Community Group

Other Curatorial Resources & Research; Susan G. Solomon, architectural historian; (609) 937-6939,

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Please indicate how you learned of the *Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence*. (Check all that apply).

☐ Direct Mailing ☐ Magazine Announcement ☐ Previous Selection Committee member ☑ Other (please specify)

☐ Professional Organization ☐ Previous RBA entrant ☐ Online Notice

☐ Bruner/Loeb Forum

colleague referral

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2011 RUDY BRUNER AWARD PROJECT AT-A-GLANCE

RUDY BRUNER AWARD

FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

PROJECT AT-A-GLANCE

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Project Name Imagination Playground at Burling Slip

Address South, John and Front Streets City/State/ZIP New York, NY 10038

1. Give a brief overview of the project.

The first Imagination Playground Park opened to the public on July 27, 2010, at Burling Slip in the South Street Seaport area of New York City, a collaboration between the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and Rockwell Group. Features of this 18,000 square foot, site-specific park include: a ramp, sandpit, slide, cascading water channel, rope climbing structure, masts and pulleys, and a listening forest. Inspired by the commercial activity that took place at historic Burling Slip, loose parts such as burlap bags, buckets, shovels, brooms, carts and fabric are to be incorporated within the play activities. And to reflect the proximity to the East River, buckets, sandbags and wooden dams have been integrated into the water play. Seating and storytelling can happen in the tiered steps of the amphitheater.

Imagination Playground allows each play session to become a new experience, encouraging open-ended free play and a variety of play patterns. The concept centers around a set of 300 large foam blocks of 15 different shapes. Manufactured in the U.S. from biodegradable waterproof foam, Imagination Playground Blocks are resistant to mold, mildew and micro-organisms. With Imagination Playground, children can create their own narratives, activities and environments; or simply enjoy forms and textures. Water and sand features facilitate mixed-material use, extending and animating play sessions.

2. Why does the project merit the *Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence*? (You may wish to consider such factors as: effect on the urban environment; innovative or unique approaches to any aspect of project development; new and creative approaches to urban issues; design quality.)

There's a national play deficit that's negatively impacting the health and well-being of our children. The decline of play has been shown to accompany impeded social, emotional, cognitive and physical development, as well as increased levels of aggression and anti-social behavior. It has also been linked to increases in childhood obesity rates. Promoting unstructured play during early childhood is an exceptional way to increase healthy levels of physical activity. When allowed to direct their own play, children broaden their experiences, expand their linguistic abilities, exercise their physical and mental strength, and improve their dexterity.

Traditional playgrounds consist primarily of fixed equipment, such as slides, monkey bars and teeter-totters, all of which focus on developing children's gross motor skills. Imagination Playground, on the other hand, is an interactive, transformable environment that prompts children to manipulate their environment and create a playspace of their own with sand, water and loose parts. Using innovative designs, Imagination Playground addresses a broader spectrum of play needs through opportunities for fantasy play and socio-cooperative play, in addition to more traditional running, jumping and climbing. Users say that Imagination Playground can have incredible effects on physical, cognitive, social and emotional development.

In addition to the great play benefits this project has brought, the introduction of Imagination Playground to the South Street Seaport neighborhood has succeeded in transforming a tattered parking lot into a vibrant, engaging space that families can enjoy. The project, a result of a public-private partnership and large-scale collaboration, has garnered great acclaim and has been hailed as a harbinger of innovative play practices across the country and around the world.

Free and open to the public, Imagination Playground at Burling Slip provides a completely new type of play experience to the children of New York City, as well as the hundreds of thousands of visitors who travel to the South Street Seaport each year.

2011
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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

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1. Describe the underlying values and goals of the project. What, if any, signifcant trade-offs were required to implement the project?

The goals of the Burling Slip project were three-fold; to create a new generation of children benefiting from more challenging and imaginative play spaces; to increase public awareness of the importance of well funded, maintained neighborhood play spaces; and to spread the Imagination Playground concept to other locations, national and international. With Imagination Playground at Burling Slip, our challenge and objective was to create an environment that fostered free play, offered a variety of inspiring landscapes and contexts, provided a good platform for loose parts play, and paid tribute to the history of the site.

The playground is designed as a figure-8, ship-like shape on a raised hard surface with limited groupings of trees, shrubs and other greenery. The Seaport's cobblestone walkways extend south to incorporate the playground. Visually, the idea is to maintain the area's flat plane appearance. This was all done to keep the area's overall feel of a working slip. Children's play areas include sand and water features to give the space another connection to its waterfront home.

One of the biggest challenges we faced was obtaining the right site for Imagination Playground. As a long-time resident of the neighborhood, architect and designer David Rockwell was eager to build the playground in downtown Manhattan, as it would help to contribute to the redevelopment efforts in the area since 9/11. The team worked closely with the New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC), which played an instrumental role in coordinating this project, including giving up its parking lot as the site for the playground. We also teamed with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) and The New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), both of which provided us with funding to support construction efforts. Additionally, As we were well into the construction of the site, we found that there were two water mains and a sewer line located directly under the construction site. We worked closely with DEP to move those elements into a space under an adjacent street. In addition, our agreement with the New York City Parks and Recreation Department will ensure the oversight, operation and maintenance of the Burling Slip site moving forward.

2. Briefly describe the project's urban context. How has the project impacted the local community? Who does the project serve? How many people are served by the project?

Imagination Playground at Burling Slip sits at the center of the historic South Street Seaport, a 12 square-block historic district on the East River in Lower Manhattan that once acted as maritime hub of New York City. South Street Seaport now serves as New York City's largest concentration of restored early 19th-century commercial buildings. Free and open to the public, the South Street Seaport is a major attraction, loved by tourists and local residents alike, that draws hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Cobblestone streets lead visitors to shops, restaurants, museums, boat tours and historical sailing vessels that are docked at the Seaport.

Imagination Playground at Burling Slip provides opportunities for both physical and imaginative activity with the integration of loose parts and a manipulable environment, helping to address the critical need for unstructured play. With a growing number of residents with young families, Imagination Playground at Burling Slip also provides the downtown Manhattan community with a family-oriented gathering space where children can create, imagine and direct their own play. Free and open to the public, Imagination Playground at Burling Slip provides a completely new type of play experience to the children of New York City, as well as the hundreds of thousands of visitors who travel to the South Street Seaport each year.

3. Describe the key elements of the development process, including community participation where appropriate.

In cultivating the space, we wanted to place an emphasis on public, communal gathering places where people can connect, and on imaginative environments that engage all the senses – gearing the outcome towards a child's imagination and development. To accomplish our goals, we needed to collaborate with a number of individuals and institutions.

Starting in 2004, the design and development process took over five years to complete. We consulted with seminal figures in the field of play and education during the last five years, especially Roger Hart, director of the Children's Environments Research Group at the City University of New York; Susan Solomon, author of American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space; and Penny Wilson, a renowned British Play Worker. They were extraordinarily helpful in providing historical and theoretical context and insights while we were deciding how the playground should take shape.

In 2006 , Rockwell Group formalized a public-private partnership with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. We reached out the the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), which provided us with funding to support construction efforts. The New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) also provided funding for the relocation of two water mains and a sewer line into the adjacent street. The New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC) played an instrumental role in coordinating this project, including giving up its parking lot as the site for the playground.

In 2008, the loose parts prototypes were tested at a number of local sites. From these test play dates, we

4. Describe the financing of the project. Please include all funding sources and square foot costs where applicable.

This was a public-private partnership between the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and Rockwell Group. The project was made possible by a $4.5 million grant from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), which is funded through Community Development Block Grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) also provided $3 million for the relocation of two water mains and a sewer line into the adjacent street. The New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC) played an instrumental role in coordinating this project, including giving up its parking lot as the site for the playground.

5. Is the project unique and/or does it address significant urban issues? Is the model adaptable to other urban settings?

Currently, the Burling Slip site is the sole Imagination Playground site-specific park in existence. While the desire to create site-specific Imagination Playgrounds in other cities certainly exists, we are keenly aware of the financial restrictions many cities are facing at this time. That is why we have designed Imagination Playground in a Box. This semi-portable design allows us to address the play deficit affecting children across the nation with affordable, adaptable means. Rockwell Group has partnered with KaBOOM!, the nation's leading not-for-profit dedicated to bringing play back into the lives of children. This partnership will create many more opportunities for creative children's play, in thousands of locations across the country, many more play spaces with loose parts for kids to play with, and an increased awareness of the value of creative play in addition to gross motor play.

As with all of our designs, Imagination Playground in a Box has gone through years of design testing to reach its current point. With support from the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, Imagination Playground in a Box launched at Brooklyn's Brownsville Playground in summer 2008. The program was a huge success, receiving very positive feedback from the Parks Department, the local residents, and most importantly the children. Since then, the Parks Department has purchased ten more sets, which they made available in greatly underserved locations throughout New York City during the summers of 2009 and 2010.

Another aspect of the Imagination Playground concept that makes it adaptable to sites is the integration of a Play Associate. Play Associates are trained adults who enable a setting in which children can direct their own play. Play Associate training is part of the Imagination Playground purchase price. The training is offered by KaBOOM! online in on-demand format.

2011
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AWARD USE

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Please separate this page from the rest of the application. Award Use should be submitted in a sealed envelope along with the application materials. It will not be used in judging entries or be seen by members of the Selection Committee.

Please describe how *Award* monies will be used to benefit the project. (The *Award* check will be made out to the Applicant unless otherwise specified.)

If won, Award monies will be used towards bringing Imagination Playground in a Box to other cities across the nation, by subsidizing the work of Imagination Playground LLC.

** This statement should be signed by the applicant. Photocopies or facsimile copies of the statement with original signature is acceptable. Award Use statement should be submitted in a sealed envelope along with the application materials.

Name and Title

Date

2011 RUDY BRUNER AWARD PUBLIC AGENCY **PERSPECTIVE**

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FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

PUBLIC AGENCY PERSPECTIVE

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This sheet is to be filled out by a staff representative of a public agency directly involved in the financing, design review, or public approvals that affected this project.

Name Nancy Barthold | Title Assistant Commissioner

Organization NYC Parks and Recreation | Telephone (212)

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Signature | Date 12/10/2010

1. What role did your agency play in the development of this project? Describe any requirements made of this project by your agency (e.g., zoning, public participation, public benefits, impact statements).

While the design of this playground was a pro bono gift to the City by David Rockwell, the project followed the New York City Department of Parks and Recreations Capital Projects procedures. The design was reviewed by our staff and Commissioner and also passed through the City's Design Commissioner and Landmarks. The design also went through a public review process and was presented to the disabled community for review.

2. How was this project intended to benefit your city? What trade-offs and compromises were required to implement the project? How did your agency participate in making them?

The playground continues the revitalization of Lower Manhattan, it furthers Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC goal to create new parks and open spaces, and it also reaffirms our Administration's commitment to 'Excellence in Design' by collaborating with our city's top architects, designers, and artists to create exceptional structures and spaces.

3. Describe the project's impact on your city. Please be as specific as possible.

While NYC is able to reconstruct and modernize many of its playgrounds, it is rare that the city is able to create new ones in neighborhoods that need them. In this case a street bed, used for parking, is now a popular play space. NYC Parks oversees over 1,000 playgrounds. Most of them have traditional play equipment. Imagination Playground is a different offering that provides children with the opportunity to engage their imagination.

Imagination Playground provides a flexible environment for many types of play, rather than prescribed activities, through three key components: an open multi-level space with large sand and water features; a huge array of loose parts, essentially a variety of toys and tools; and trained staff on-site who maintain and manage the site. These elements enable children to play in an intuitive way: build something, tear it down, and start all over again.

Rockwell Group's design and efforts have resulted in a playground that captures Burling Slip and South Street Seaport's rich maritime and commercial history, with elements such as a cascading water channel, a climbing rope, masts and pulleys, and a lookout ramp with telescopes. The built landscape also incorporates amphitheater seating and a "crow's nest" that has a double function as a storage unit for the playground's loose parts.

4. Did this project result in new models of public/private partnerships? Are there aspects of this project that would be instructive to agencies like yours in other cities?

Yes. The project required many different New York City agencies to work together.
The project was made possible by a $4.5 million grant from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), which is funded through Community Development Block Grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) also provided $3 million for the relocation of two water mains and a sewer line into the adjacent street. The New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC) played an instrumental role in coordinating this project, including giving up its parking lot as the site for the playground.
The offering by David Rockwell of a pro bono design kicked off a partnership between the Rockwell Group and NYC Parks. Many educational organizations banded together to work with NYC Parks' Recreation Division and Rockwell to test out the loose parts and to assist in the training model for the playground staff.

There are many aspects of the project that would be valuable for other cities. The cooperative funding efforts and the creation of an endowment to pay for maintenance and staffing. The loose parts model and presence of sand and water are great but have also presented some challenges which we have learned from.

5. What do you consider to be the most and least successful aspects of this project?

Since the day we opened the gates, the playground has been full of happy kids. Only now that it is getting cold, is the visitorship slowing down a little bit. We have received many great comments. The playground has brought a new and innovative model of play to downtown Manhattan. There is very little to point out that has been unsuccessful about the project.

If we need to express a challenge, it would be that we rushed to finish the playground in a one year time frame and have been challenged with the operation of some of the mechanical systems. There is a lot of sand in the playground and that fouls with some of the drains. All of the kinks in the system are being worked out and will provide us with good lessons for the next Imagination Playground that we build.

2011 RUDY BRUNER AWARD PROFESSIONAL CONSULTANT **PERSPECTIVE**

PROFESSIONAL CONSULTANT PERSPECTIVE

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This sheet is to be filled out by a professional who worked as a consultant on the project providing services other than physical design or planning (e.g., legal services).

Name George E. Forman | Title Emeritus Professor

Organization University of Massachusetts | Telephone (413) 256-8846

Address 19 The Hollow | City/State/ZIP Amherst, MA 01002

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1. What role did you or your organization play in the development of this project?

During the past two years I observed beta sites for Imagination Playground, such as the one at Brownsville (Brooklyn). I video taped the children at play and met with Caroline Kim three of four times at the Rockwell headquarters at Union Square to discuss design changes in the IP blocks. I have continued working with the Rockwell Group to create a 22-page booklet to be read by the Playground Associates. This booklet (in press) points out the affordances of the IP blocks for particular forms of play, makes suggestions for how to extend play, and alerts the Playground Associates for the developmental differences across ages 2 through 12.

2. Describe the project's impact on its community. Please be as specific as possible.

The Imagination Playground brings children together in creative activities. The loose parts allows cross-age play and supports collaboration due to the scale and safety of the foam blocks. Parents come to watch their children enjoy these materials and in turn begin to dialogue with each other, thereby creating a deeper sense of community. The children return to build and extend structures from the previous days and this too gives the children a sense of group accomplishment that is not short lived, but continues to grow.

3. How might this project be instructive to others in your profession?

The Imagination Play creates opportunities for the study of group play. The children's work is both visible and audible and continues over a protracted period of time. Imagination Playground provides an incredible opportunity for naturalistic observation without interference in the flow of play. One could also study the effects of adding found objects or other provocations that could increase the quality of play. This research could greatly assist us to advocate more effectively for the value of play in other settings such as schools and children's museums.

4. What do you consider to be the most and least successful aspects of this project?

In my observations I have been amazed at how children work together. The large scale loose parts in Imagination Playground almost requires team work, like raising a barn in long ago times. I also think the design of the loose parts and the landscape has made it possible for children to create smaller work teams here and there and not continually get in each other's space. And the design of the foam blocks have deliberate surprises, such as an off-centered hole in a wheel or an axel that bends, that provoke high level thinking as the children get the joke and then make use of it.

2011 RUDY BRUNER AWARD ARCHITECT OR DESIGNER **PERSPECTIVE**

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ARCHITECT OR DESIGNER PERSPECTIVE

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This sheet is to be filled out by a design professional who worked as a consultant on the project, providing design, planning, or other services.

Name David Rockwell

Title CEO and Founder of Rockwell Group

Organization Rockwell Group

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1. Describe the design concept of this project, including urban design considerations, choice of materials, scale, etc.

Imagination Playground at Burling Slip opened at the end of July, in partnership between me and my firm Rockwell Group, and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. The entire footprint of the playground is 18,000 square feet including the exterior plazas, but the play area within the fence is 12,000 square feet. Features of this site-specific park include: a 1,200 square foot elevated ramp made of reclaimed teak wood; a large oval two-tiered sandpit with three 14 feet high Douglas fir traditional sail masts with a double-pulley system with wheel cranks that allow children to work in tandem to load-up the canvas bags affixed to the ropes and move them from one mast to the other; a carved granite water table and cascading water channel with slots for sluice gates loose parts and holes to fill with cork loose parts to allow kids to manipulate and control the flow of the running water; and a 30 foot long, 8 foot high whispering fence made of red and yellow painted off-the-shelf cast iron pipes pipes, sound funnels and nautical-inspired attachments including flags, bell chimes, weather vane, anemometer, and spinning and rotating wheels, instruments that allow children to play with the effect of sound.

An integral part of loose part play at Imagination Playground are around 358 uniquely designed blue blocks made of a lightweight, waterproof, biodegradable foam and come in 22 different shapes and sizes, which children can use throughout the playground.

2. Describe the most important social and programmatic functions of the design.

Imagination Playground was the result of over five years of research, development, focus groups, testing and construction. It all started when I began spending time in playgrounds with his two children, and noticed a lack of encouragement of imagination, creativity and variation. After partnering with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, so began the journey of designing a playground that catalyzed opportunities for child-directed, unstructured, free play. And what resulted was Imagination Playground, an interactive, transformable environment that inspires children to manipulate their environment and create a playspace of their own with sand, water, and custom designed loose parts. All of this together provides a changing array of elements that allow children to constantly reconfigure their environment and design their own course of play.

3. Describe the major challenges of designing this project and any design trade-offs or compromises required to complete the project.

One of the major challenges was designing the Imagination Playground blocks, and finding just the right composition, material, shapes, and sizes that would best inspire children's imaginations. We wanted the design of the blocks to encourage kids to use them to create their own stories and narratives. We also wanted the shapes to be conducive for a variety of different structures, such as simple geometric shapes (small to oversized in scale) for architectural structures, and shapes that can move or create movement like hinges, connectors, chutes, and gears.

4. Describe the ways in which the design relates to its urban context.

This site-specific Imagination Playground park was designed to echo the history and context of its South Street Seaport neighborhood. The reclaimed teak wood planks used throughout the playground were designed to recollect the wood decking used on historic piers surrounding Burling Slip, and decking on ships, sandpit, slide, cascading water channel. Referencing features of a ship are the three masts in the sandpit, and the 18 foot high red crow's nest where children can climb up the stairs for a lookout point. The cascading water channel and pool in the aquatheater allow kids to manipulate and control the flow of the running water to echo riverbank play. Inspired by the commercial activity that took place at historic Burling Slip, other loose parts such as burlap bags, buckets, shovels, brooms, carts and fabric are incorporated within the play activities. And to reflect the proximity to the East River, buckets, sandbags and wooden dams have been integrated into the water play.

2011 RUDY BRUNER AWARD OTHER PERSPECTIVE

OTHER PERSPECTIVE

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Name Susan Solomon

Title Founder

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1. What role did you play in the development of this project?

I am trained as an art historian and have extensive experience as a curator, writer and speaker, and have recently authored the book, American Playgrounds. For Imagination Playground at Burling Slip, I served as a consultant from the very early conceptual stages of the project, including advising on the history of playgrounds and urban spaces, and playgrounds as urban spaces.

2. Describe the impact that this project has had on the your community. Please be as specific as possible.

From a broader community perspective, and the world of architecture and landscape architecture, Imagination Playground at Burling Slip has had a tremendous impact. Working professionals in architecture and landscape architecture now more carefully consider the role and potential of urban parks and playgrounds. From a smaller, more detailed point of view, the elements of sand and water have made a huge return and are increasingly incorporated into playground design. Additionally, commercial manufacturers are looking closely at Imagination Playground as a ground breaking concept, embracing the loose parts concept.

3. What trade-offs and compromises were required during the development of the project? Did you participate in making them?

After careful thought, there really were no trade-offs or compromises.

4. What do you consider to be the the most and least successful aspects of this project?

The most successful aspect of this project is the unbelievable broad recognition it has received since its opening. A playground can no longer be referred to as just a piece of equipment. Imagination Playground has changed the perception of what is a playground. This has and will have a large effect on different municipalities.

If I was to comment on the least successful aspect of the project, I may indicate that the number of play associates should be analyzed a bit further. Over the summer, there were at times, almost 300 children at the playground, and more than two play associates would have been ideal. This is perhaps a seasonal issue to study, and something to be further looked at during the course of the year and beyond.

Imagination Beyond

2011 RUDY BRUNER AWARD COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE **PERSPECTIVE**

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FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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This sheet is to be filled out by someone who was involved, or who represents an organization that was involved, in helping the project respond to neighborhood issues.

Name Abby Ehrlich | Title Director of Parks Programming

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Signature Digitally signed by Abby Ehrlich DN: cn=Abby Ehrlich, o=BPCPC, ou=BPCPC, email=aehrlich@bpcparks.org, c=US Date: 2010.12.13 15:11:26 -05'00' | Date December 13, 2010

1. How did you, or the organization you represent, become involved in this project? What role did you play?

My organization has a 20 year history of providing play, activities, classes and events for children and families in our parks. Some of our play areas are not traditional playgrounds, but use nature in a playful or participatory way, with some play features added. I was on the design team for one such park in our system. I also hire and train our play leader staff, which has tripled in the 12 years I've been here.

I got involved with the Imagination playground first as an informal advisor, and then was asked to be a professional advisor to the design team. I worked mostly with their designers on custom design loose parts that relate to the history of Burling Slip, a large module block creation, and some spatial relationship design in the playground itself. I focussed on toy storage, sand and water play, public access and staff training issues, and I advised on bringing nature and creative activities into the playground's schedule.

A couple of years before the Imagination Playground opened Rockwell Group wanted to test the blocks and observe their use in a playground and I organized the test with children from the local community in a Battery Park City playground.

2. From the community's point of view, what were the major issues concerning this project?

Access and play-worthiness. You always want to build a place that holds interest for a child for many years, and that addresses the interest and needs (social, physical, cognitive) of all sorts of children, and the adults or teens who visit the playground with them. There's no park near-by, so this playground had to offer enough to be a stand-alone destination.

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE PERSPECTIVE (CONT'D)

3. Has this project made the community a better place to live or work? If so, how?

I think it has. It's a place where children feel like their interests are addressed and provided for. I think it makes children feel like they are valued members of a community, and in their own way, become civil-minded citizens. There was a parking lot her before the Imagination Playground. Now there are places to climb, get wet, dig in the sand, push small wheel barrows around, load and unload toys and play equipment on wagons, hang out with friends, hide, relax, talk with a play worker, all sorts of activities that children desire and need to grow. Adults with children appreciate this, and especially in a city where we all live in small rooms without yards, playing with other children is how communities are built in a person to person way.

4. Would you change anything about this project or the development process you went through?

It needs trees and plantings. There was a lot of concern that maintenance would be too difficult.

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RUDY BRUNER AWARD

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DEVELOPER PERSPECTIVE

Please answer questions in space provided. Answers to all questions should be typed or written directly on the forms. If the forms are not used and answers are typed on a separate page, each answer must be preceded by the question to which it responds, and the length of each answer should be limited to the area provided on the original form.

This sheet is to be filled out by the person who took primary responsibility for project financing or is a representative of the group which did.

Name Lawrence Mauro Title Manager, Lower Manhattan Program

Organization City of New York Parks and Recreation Telephone (718) 760-6598

Address NYC Parks & Rec., Olmsted Center, Flushing Meadows Pk. City/State/ZIP Flushing, NY 11368

Fax (718) 760-6741 E-mail Lawrence.Mauro@parks.nyc.gov

Signature Date 12/10/2010

1. What role did you or your company play in the development of this project? Describe the scope of involvement.

Unlike most NYC Parks projects, the proposal for the the project was brought to the agency by the architect, David Rockwell and was not an agency devoloped initiative or community request. Parks then worked hand-in-hand with the Rockwell Group to find a suitable location for the project, evaluating sites around the city. The agency also worked with the architects to tailor the concept to the constraints of the selected site and its historic district setting.

The agency worked closely with the Rockwell Group, guiding them and their design team through the public approval process with the Community Board, community groups, city agencies and the landmars review process by the NYC Landmarks Commission and the New York State Historic Preservation Office.

The Agency continued to work with the design team through the development of construction documents, working closely on constructability, durability issues and conformance with agency and play safety standards. The agency also took prime responsibility in directing and coordinating the required upgrades to street, water and sewer infrastructure.

NYC Parks also bid the project for construction and directly supervised and managed the contractor through the construction process.

NYC Parks is also operating the completed facility and managing the staff.

2. What trade-offs or compromises were required during the development of the project?

As the project site's name, Burling Slip suggests this site was an indentation of open water in the shoreline for berthing ships. The slip was left as open water as the shoreline was filled out in to the East River in the Colonial era. The slip was eventually also filled in the early 1800's as the he lower tip of Manhattan expanded and larger ships needed to be berthed at larger wharves built out into deeper water. since it was filled, the site has been used as a loading area for the ships at the adjacent South Street wharves and more recently as parking.

This made the site difficult to build on from two perspectives; very poor soil conditions limited what could be built without support piles and being former street bed, utilities needed to be relocated to clear the site. The expense of relocating a major sewer line, two water mains and building on piles forced to designers to keep the design to its essentials and to make sure that play value, quality materials and the aesthetic qualities of the project were considered first and foremost. Elaborate mechanical play features and waterworks needed to be carefully value engineered. One feature, the "Hull Wall", a sloping, canted steel wall bounding one end of the playground which was meant to evoke the prow of a ship had to be sacrificed entirely because of the cost of building it in such poor soil conditions.

Another constraint, the site's location in a City, State and Federal historic district, also forced the designers to rein in their aestheic imaginations. Throughout the design process the designers needed to acheive the dual goals of designing the best play space possible and also one that was appropriate to its historic setting with limits on materials, colors, the heights of elements and sight lines.The historic site also meant there was a possibility of encountering archeological resources and, indeed, 120 feet of the timber bulkhead that once formed the historic shoreline of Manhattan was uncovered during construction. In design and construction, excavation needed to limited to the extent possible.

3. How was the project financed? What, if any, innovative means of financing were used?

Initially the project's construction was entirely funded by Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development grants through the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation as part of World Trade Center recovery programs. As it became clear that there were more utilities on the site that required relocation than initially thought, support was sought from and subsequently granted by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (NYC DEP) to fund the sewer line and water main relocations and upgrades.

The concept for the playground was as a stage for play, combining "Loose Parts", movable play elements of foam building blocks, carts, chalk and other play items, with sand and water play. Such a play environment requires a level of supervision staffing and maintenance that is well above and beyond the average playground. When The Rockwell Group approached NYC Parks with the proposal, they also committed to raising private money for an endowment that would help fund playground supervision, replacement of loose parts and maintenance above and beyond the normal playground. This endowment is currently being assembled from a variety of funding sources.

4. What do you consider to be the most and least successful aspects of the project?

The most successful aspect of the project is the mix achieved between flexible open play space for unstructured play balanced by the spaces for sand and water play to either side. When the "Loose Parts" play elements are added, all three spaces the playground provide a wide variety of play spaces with a range of play experiences that are as varied as the children using the space

As mentioned earlier, designing a project, particularly a playground, in the location in the South Street Seaport Historict District posed a unique design challenge. Playgrounds are usually, by design, colorful, visually stimulating environments and preservationists and local historic preservation groups were rightfully sceptical that a playground appropriate to the staid environment could even be designed. In the end, this imposed costraint resulted in one of the most successful aspects of the design. The elements of design combine visually at once to suggest a ship at berth without resorting to literal representations of the elements of a ship. The playground's elevated ramps, fences, fixed play equipment, storage and bathroom structure, decking and wooden walls playfully relate to the payground's nautical environment. Play elements and the loose parts toys were also designed with the activities and elements of the Seaport in mind and the design played to the project original concept's strengths, relying less on fixed play structures and more on the movable loose parts play pieces.

Some of the least successful aspects aspects of the project are related to the physical and regulatory constraints imposed by the site. With buildings and streets bounding the site on all sides, the size and configuration of the playground were more limited overall than they might have been in a more traditional park setting. Further space concessions were made for fire vehicle access corridors to adjacent buildings and for adequate street widths. As soon as it opened, the approximately 80 foot wide playground was filled to capacity. At peak hours 200 to 250 or more children and parents have packed the playground. to some extent this results in a greater level of iteration between children and cooperative play but it can also be difficult for parents and caregivers to find a place to sit.

Shade is also at a premium in the space. The South Street Seaport historically did not have trees and one of the architects' key design goals was to maintain bot views to the historic sailing ships moored at the wharves across South Street and key views of the adjacent historic buildings. Though city and state landmarks regulatory agencies made allowances for some trees and numerous umbrellas across the were provided for in the design, the space can get hot in the heat of a summer day and NYC Parks is investigating planting additional trees.


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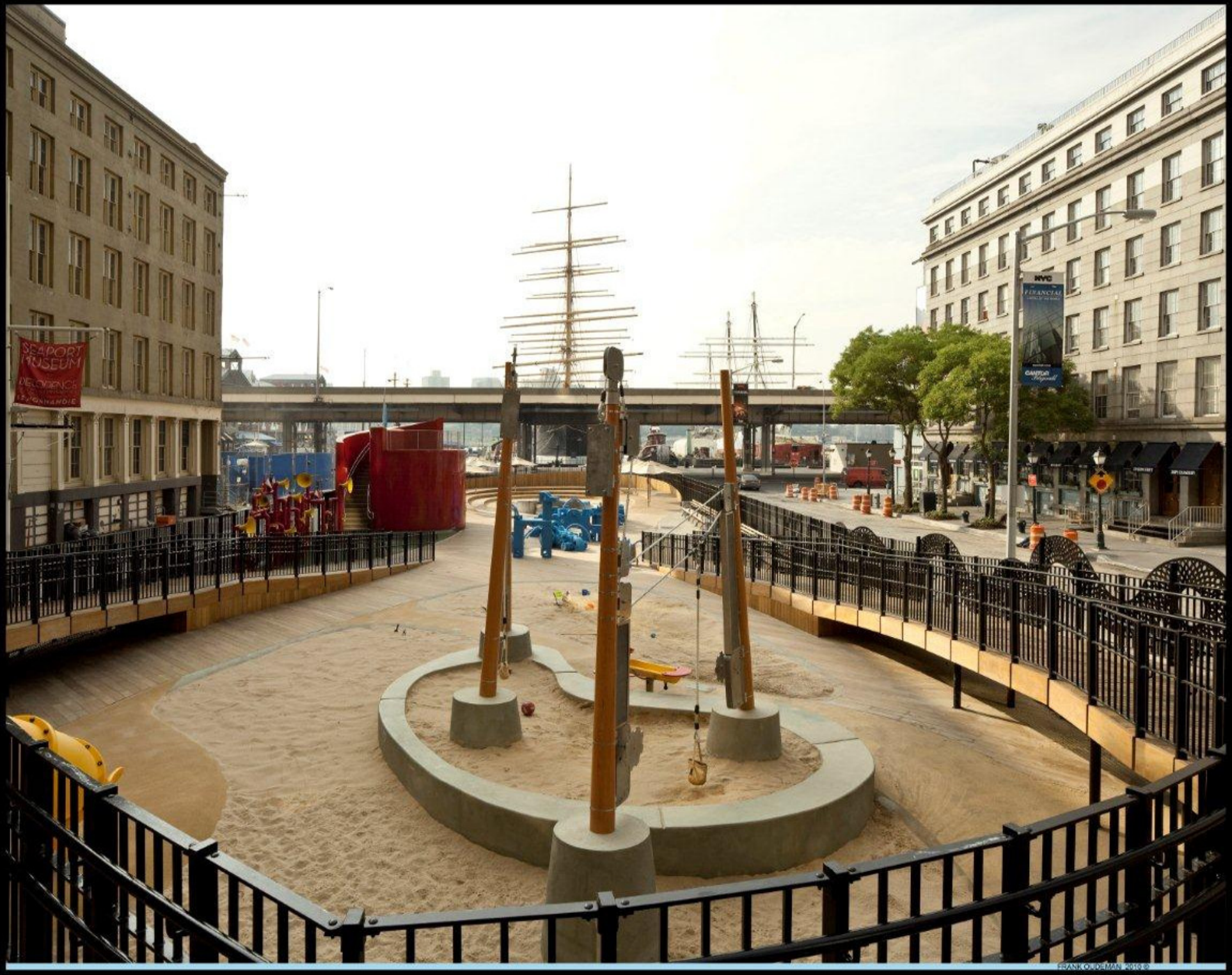
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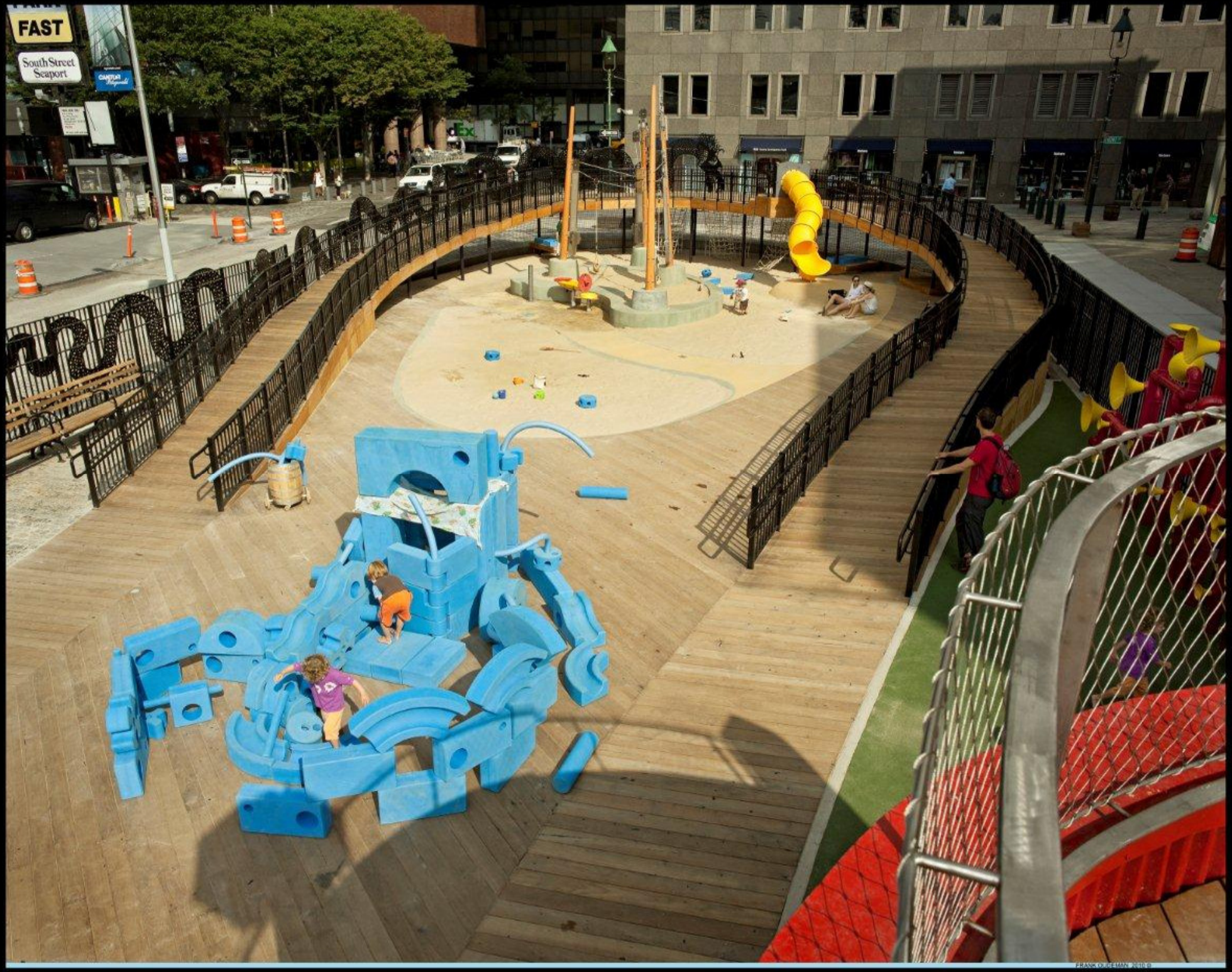
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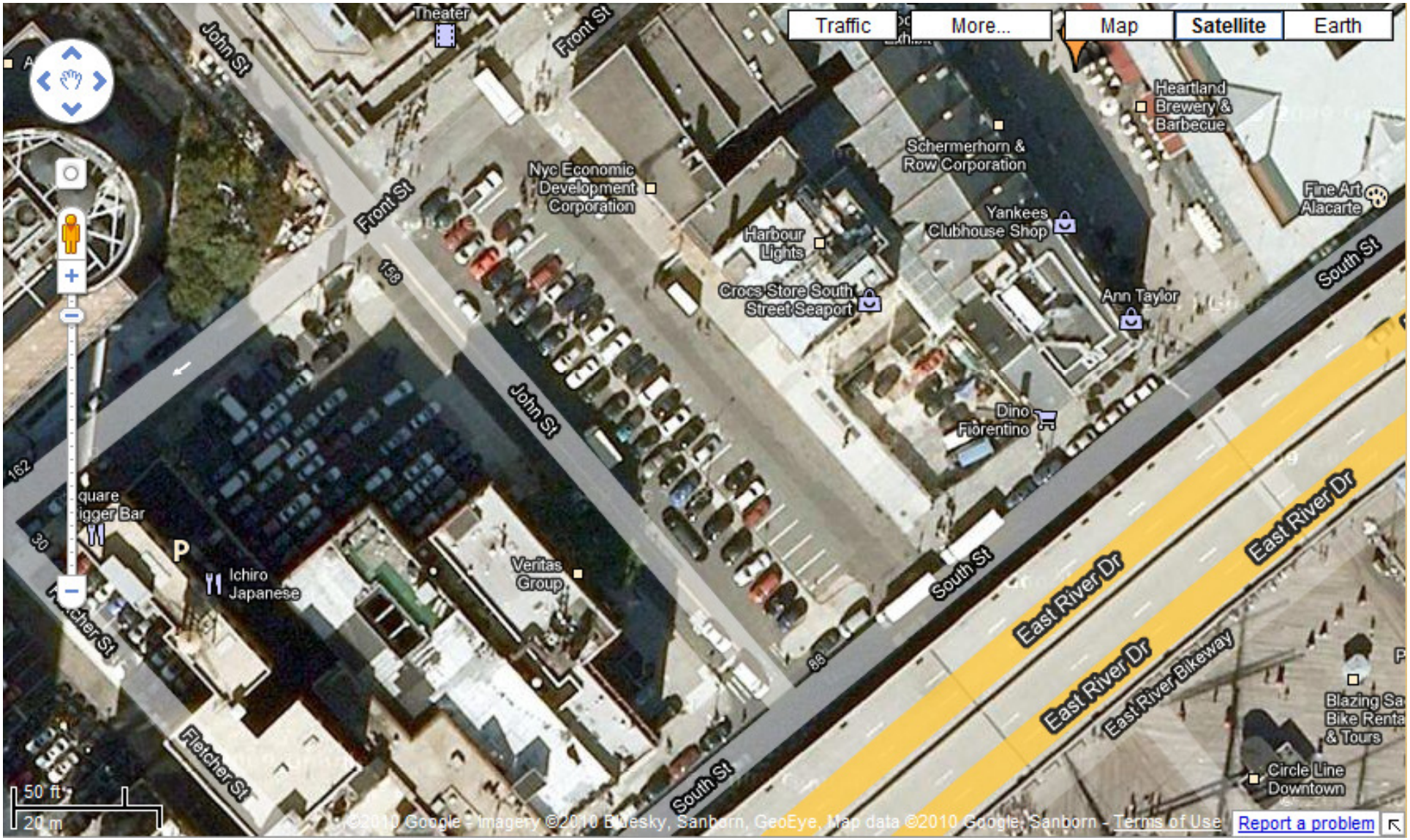
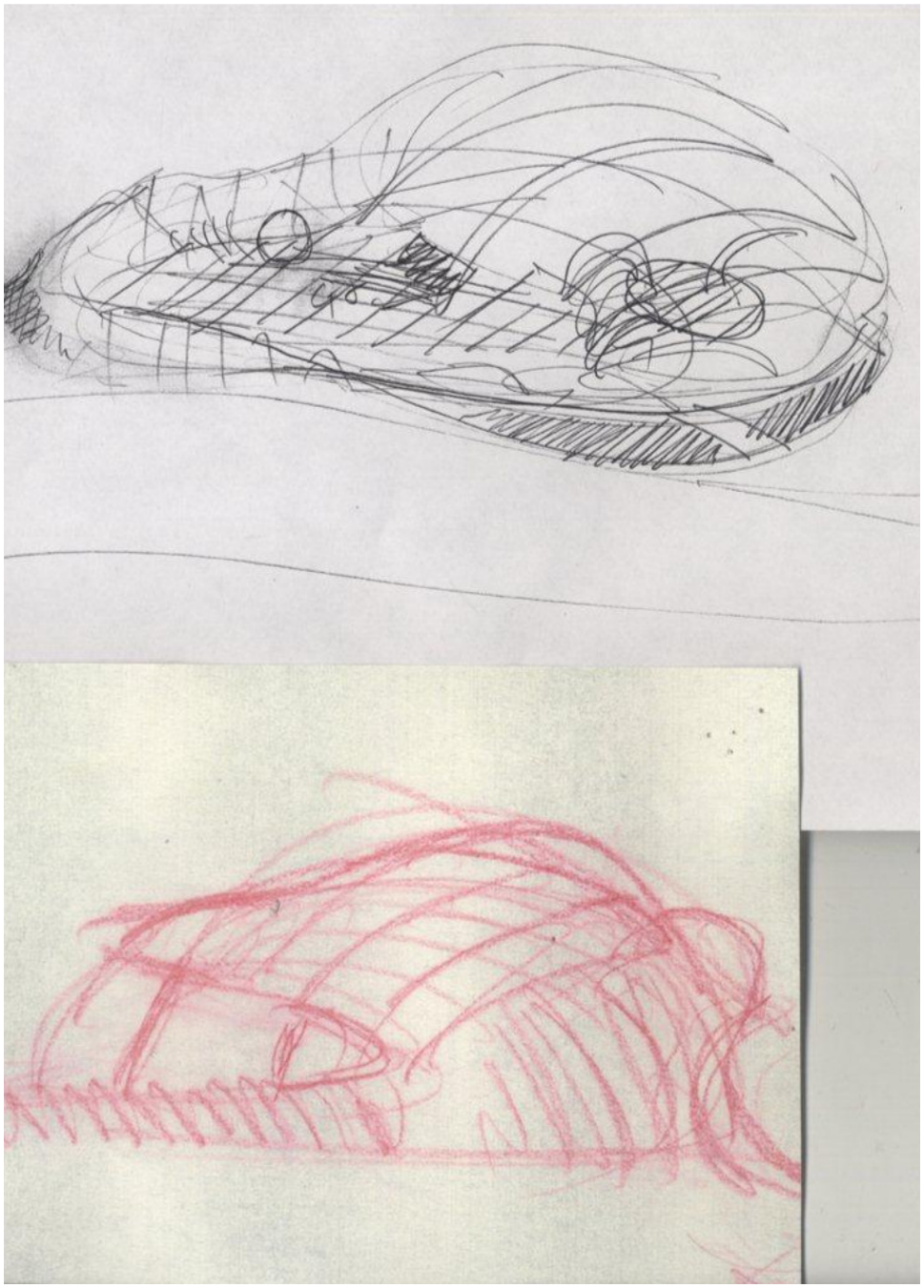
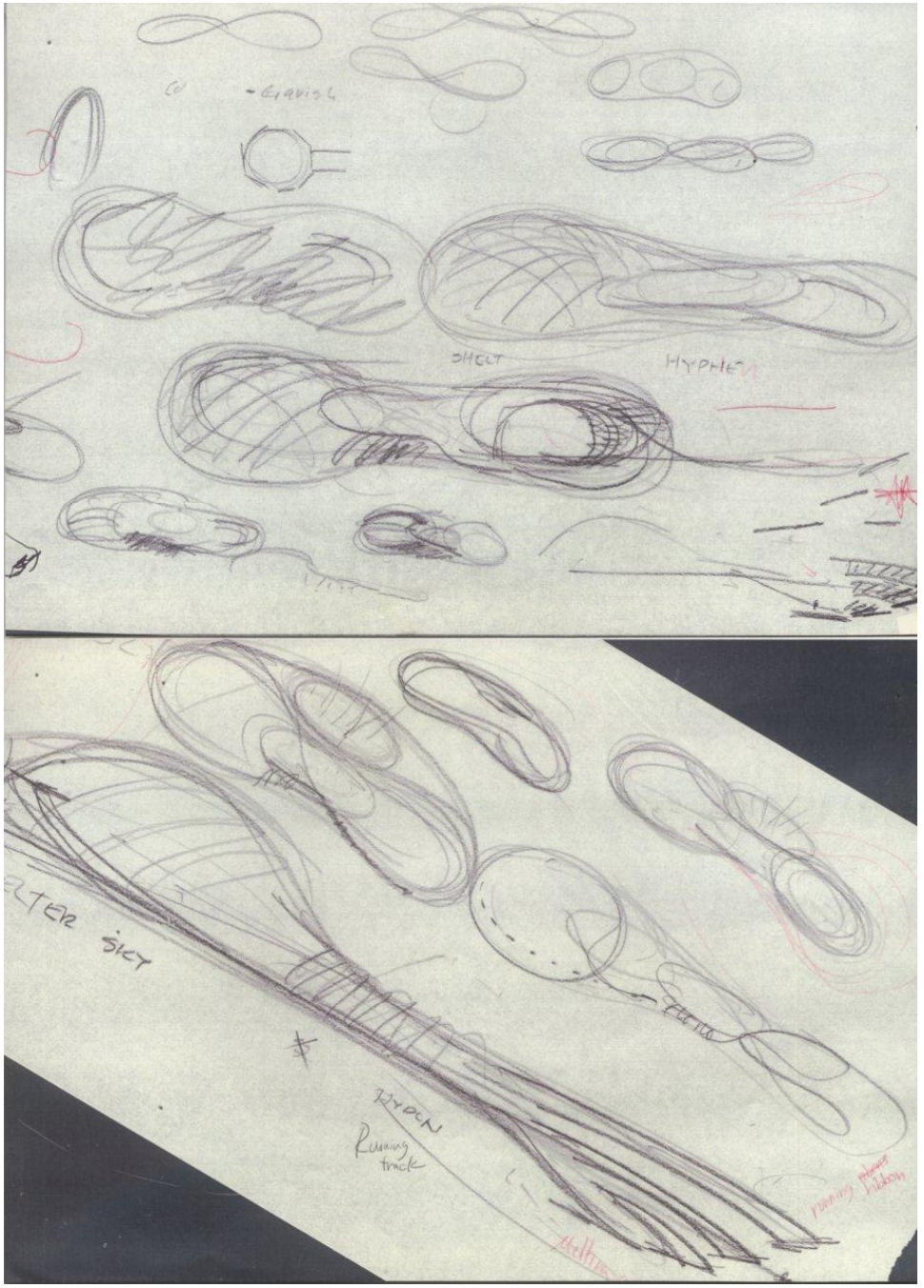
South Street Seaport

Imagination Playground at Burling Slip site prior to construction (parking lot on John Street)



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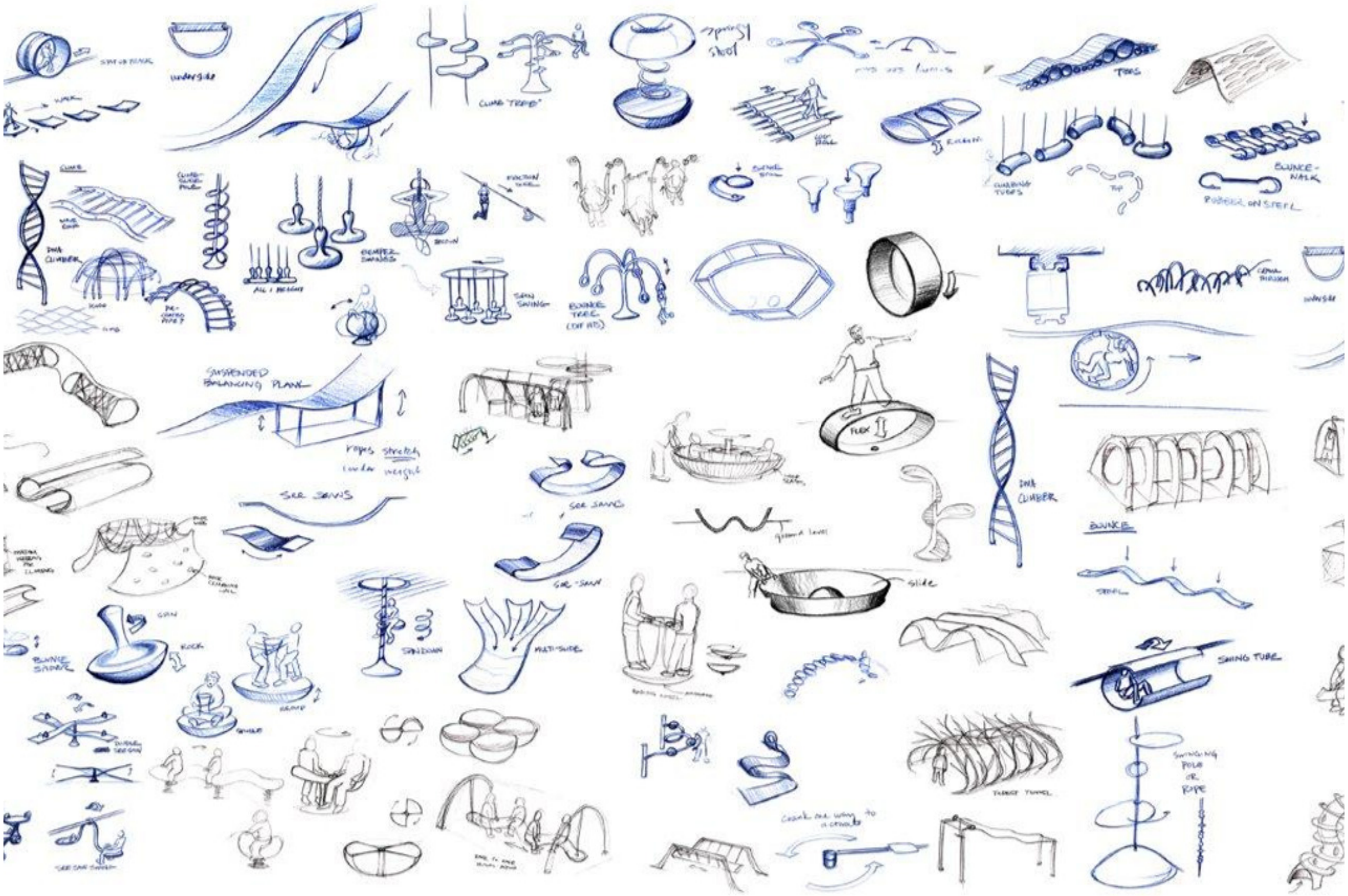
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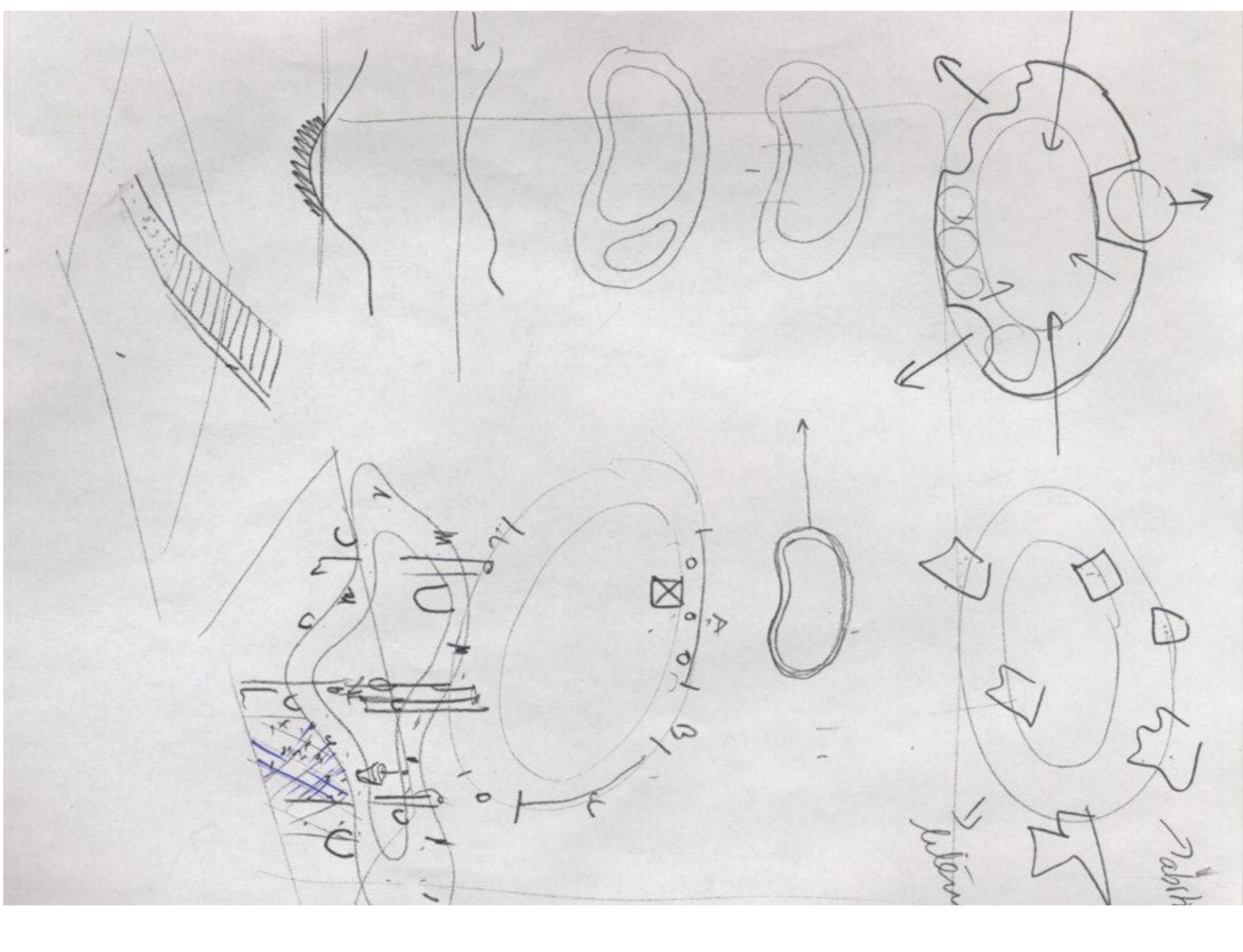

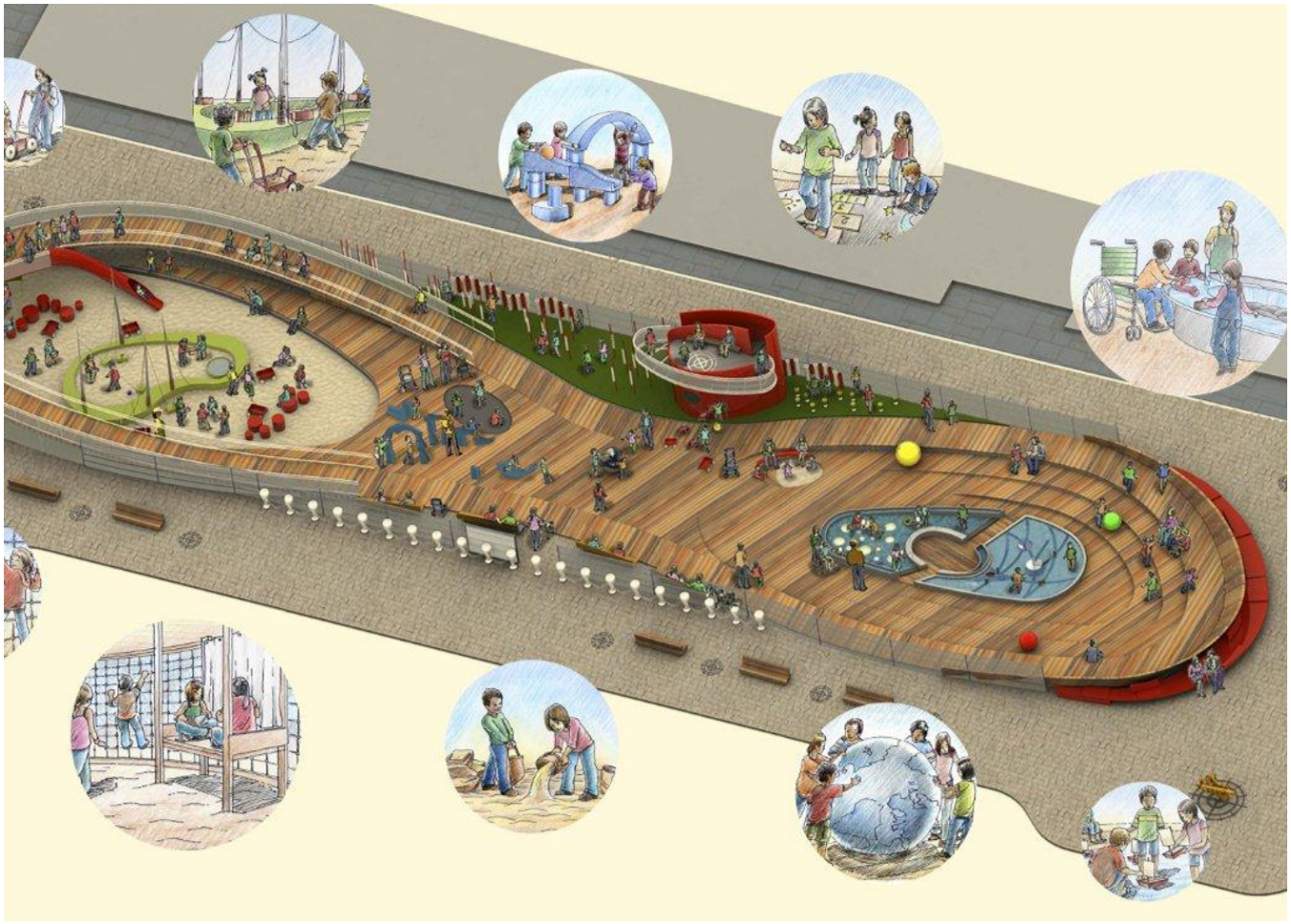

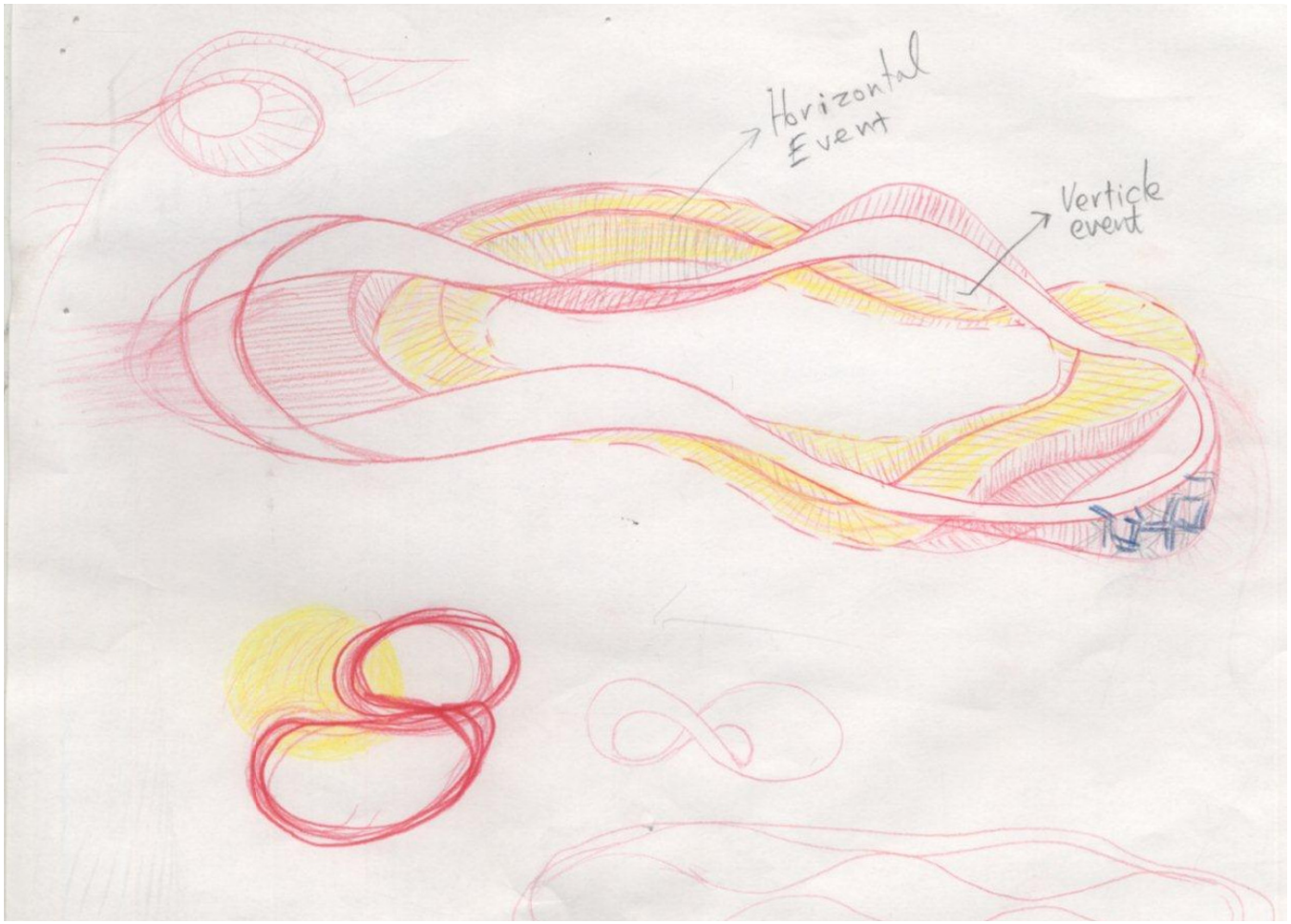
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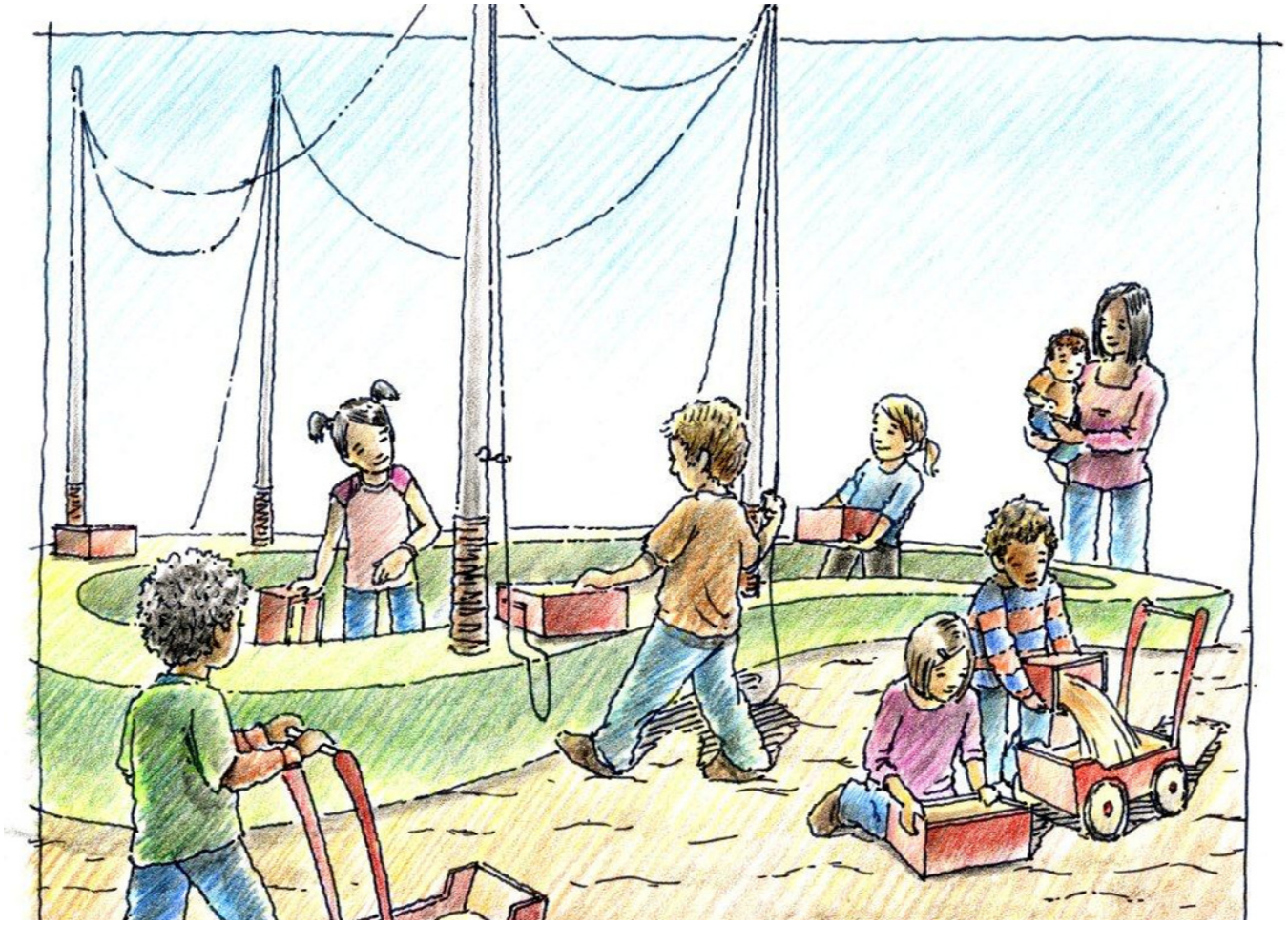

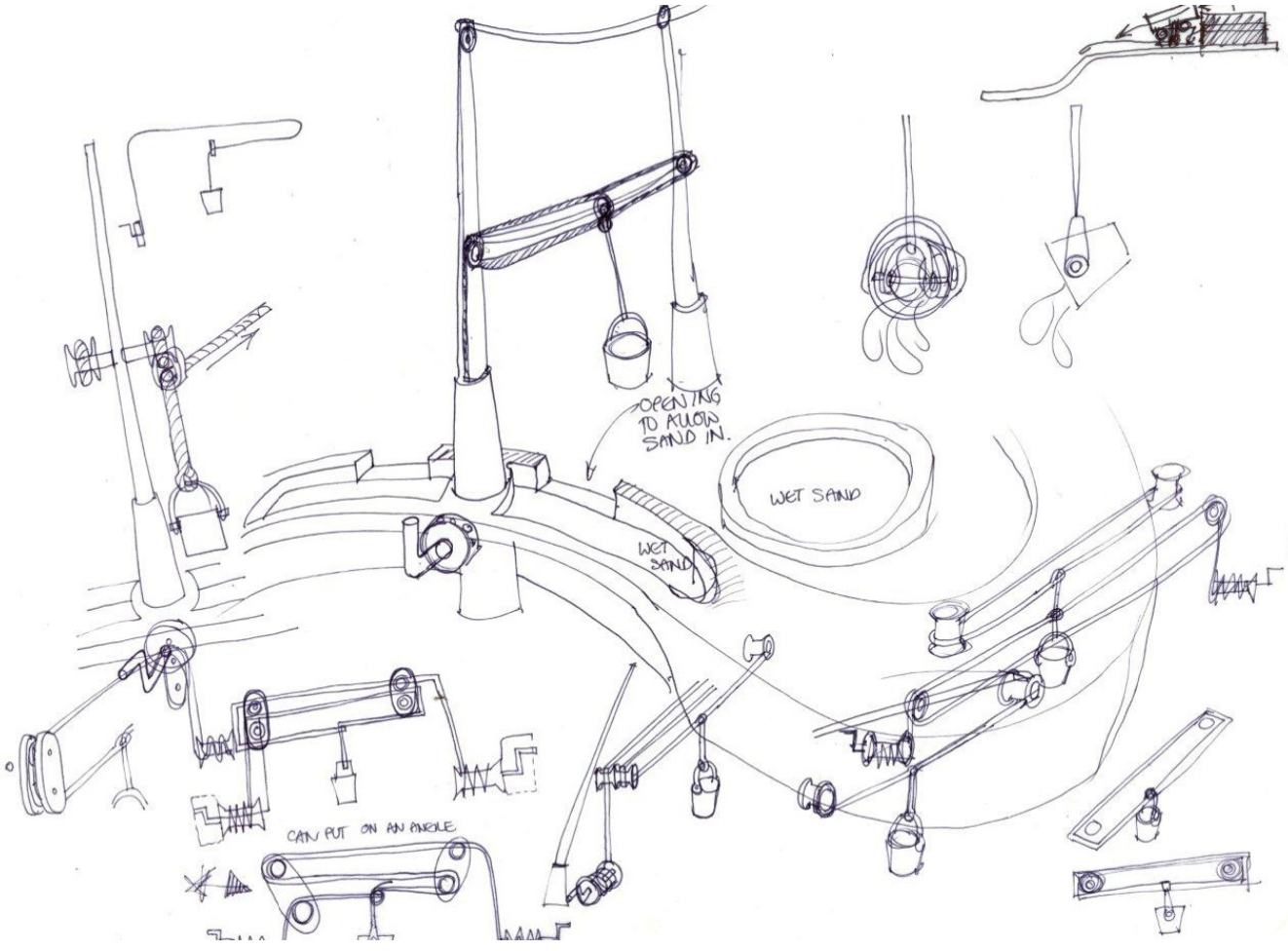
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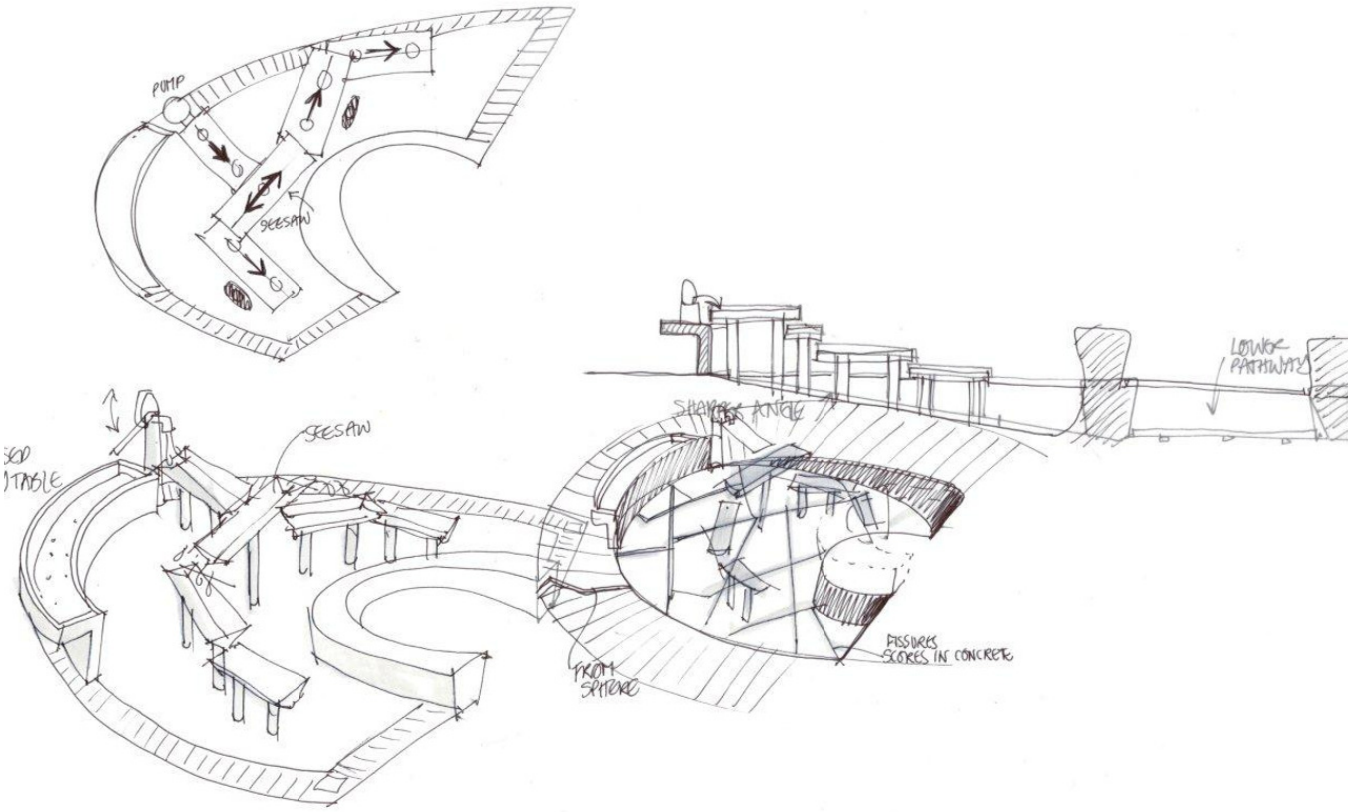
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landscape architecture

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New York's New Edges
Nancy Owens at Fort Totten

MVVA by the Hudson

Rockwell Group's Crazy Playground

New Life for Mafia Blocks

New York

Rockwell Group's Imagination Playground offers "loose parts," like an adventure playground, but it's geared toward a younger crowd.

By Daniel Jost, ASLA

THINK BACK TO YOUR CHILDHOOD. What is your favorite memory of playing outside? For New York City's parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe, Honorary ASLA, the answer to that question has nothing to do with slides or teeter-totters. Some of Benepe's most vivid childhood memories involve digging streambeds in the sloping soil of his neighborhood playground and pouring buckets of water down them. "We would invariably be chased out by the curmudgeonly 'Parkies,'" Benepe remembers.

Introducing a talk at the parks department headquarters a few years back, Benepe asked those present to share their own favorite memory of playing outside. "There were 25 people, and only one person mentioned the designed pieces of playgrounds," recalls Roger Hart, the director of the Children's Environments Research Group at the City University of New York.

FRANK OUDEMAN

Loosens Up

Unlike most playgrounds where everything is bolted to the ground, Imagination Playground provides loose parts in an effort to encourage creative play.

That's because the standard American playground is a "bizarre environment," as Hart says. Everything is fixed to the ground. Hart and colleagues like Robin Moore, Affiliate ASLA, have long pushed for more "loose parts" on playgrounds. Fixed equipment can provide places to run, climb, swing, and slide, but it offers few opportunities for creative play. Sure, some kids may pretend that a slide is a space shuttle or that a raised platform is a pirate ship, but their options are seriously limited by the static nature of most playground environments.

That's scarcely a problem at Imagination Playground, which opened in Lower Manhattan last July. Designed by architects at New York's Rockwell Group, an office obsessed with color, spectacle, and exuberance, it combines sand, water, and giant foam blocks that look like something out of a Dr. Seuss book. All can be moved and redirected. "The essential components are kids imagining something," says David Rockwell, "building it, ripping it down, and starting all over again."

Not since the High Line debuted last summer has a landscape received so much attention in the popular press. The playground was featured in both *Time* and the *New Yorker* before it even opened. And a press tour in July attracted NPR, the *New York Times, Architectural Record,* and a variety of local publications and blogs.

As with the High Line, the ideas behind Imagination Playground are not new, but its completion is no less surprising for that. Until recently, most playground designers had all but given up on providing "loose parts" in public playgrounds—especially


MAMMA MIA!

manufactured loose parts. "In big public parks like you have in New York, you just can't have a playground that has to be taken apart and stored someplace safe every night," the landscape architect Donna Walcavage told *Landscape Architecture* in 1994. But every day this summer, the staff at Imagination Playground did just that.

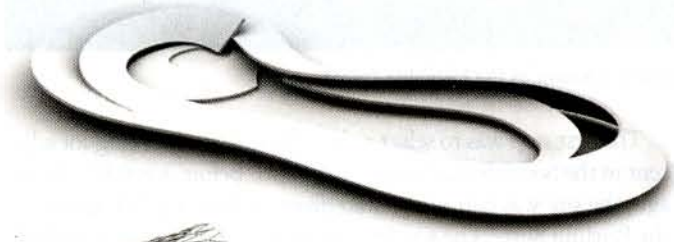
Pro Bono Playground

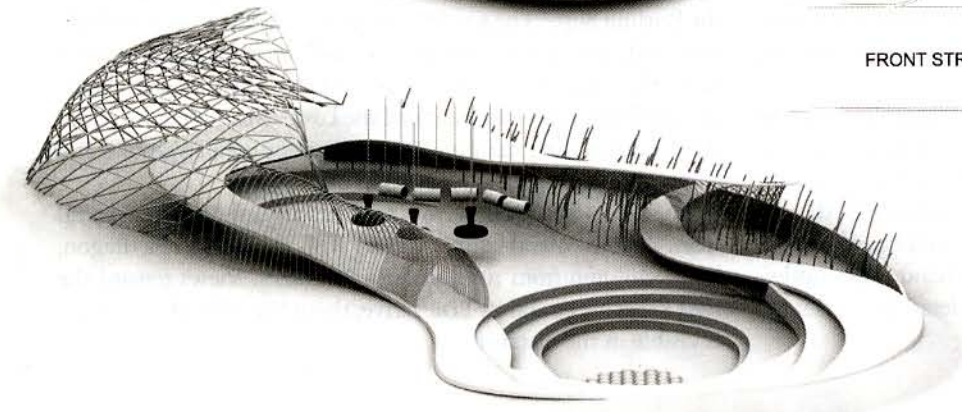
Like many innovative projects, Imagination Playground took more than a dash of guts. "This playground would not have happened if I hadn't gotten a phone call one day from David Rockwell," Benepe explains. It was a cold call. The two had never met, but they immediately bonded over their shared interest in play.

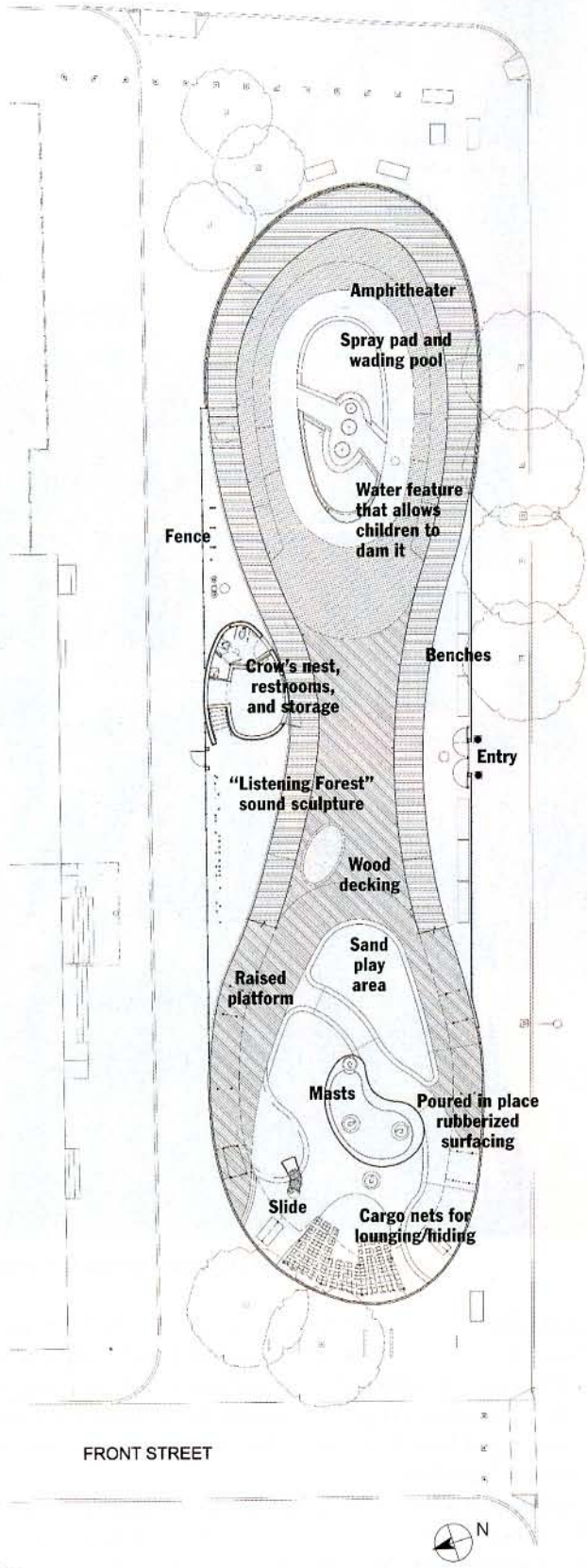
Rockwell had always wanted to design a playground, but it wasn't until his own children, Sam and Lola, reached prime playground age that he really began to throw himself into the subject. As he took his children to playgrounds throughout the city, he

The Rockwell Group designed these large foam blocks, *opposite,* so they can be used for molding sand and channeling water. Imagination Playground is located on the site of an old parking lot, *above,* adjacent to the South Street Seaport Museum. A plan, *right,* shows how the playground is divided into two areas, one focused on sand, the other on water. Rockwell Group used models, *below,* to study the playground's form.

BLANDON BELUSHIN, OPPOSITE, COURTESY ROCKWELL GROUP, THIS PAGE







A child plays with his mother at a sound sculpture known as the Listening Forest.

realized that "while there was a great variety in how the playgrounds looked, it felt like their play value was very similar," Rockwell says. His kids loved to turn things upside down, to create their own rules, and the playgrounds they visited often actively discouraged that. So, he offered to design a more imaginative playground, pro bono.

Although Rockwell Group had designed playgrounds for the rich—fancy, cheeky restaurants and hotels—it had never designed a children's playground. But as Hart, who was later brought on as a consultant, explains, the firm's work in theater, designing stage sets for the Oscars, *Hairspray,* and *Legally Blonde,* prepared them perfectly for the challenge at hand. They understood that their job was not to dictate every detail, but to set the stage for what came next.

The first step was to select a site. They chose a parking lot adjacent to the South Street Seaport Museum. Before it was filled years ago, the site was part of the waterfront, a shipping hub known as the Burling Slip. "The site fit two criteria: A playground was badly needed, and there was funding for one," Rockwell explains. They were able to tap into funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, securing $4.3 million for the playground and additional funding for underground utility work.

The site is long and narrow and surrounded by streets on all sides. A black metal fence, overlaid with the image of a dragon, keeps children from running into the street. Views toward the East River are cut off by FDR Drive, though a series of ship masts is visible in the distance.

FRANK OUDEMAN

The site is rectangular, though Rockwell has overlaid a design shaped like an infinity symbol or perhaps a peanut. A sinuous ramp defines the northwestern edge, and a series of steps that double as an amphitheater carries the form through on the southeastern side. The playground's wood decking is meant to recall the ships that once docked here, as is a series of masts with pulleys and burlap bags attached that children can play with.

There are three main areas of the playground. To the north is a sand area. On the south is a sort of wading pool/spray pad hybrid with a flowing water feature that children can dam. And in the middle are an interactive sound sculpture, an open wood deck, and a giant metal crow's nest, which houses the restroom and provides a place to store the loose parts. These parts include

Rockwell Group understood that their job was not to dictate every detail, but to set the stage for what came next.

foam blocks, blankets, burlap bags, wheelbarrows, buckets, and shovels. Different parts are brought out at different times to mix up the play experience. The only conventional play equipment used here is the plastic slide that comes down from the ramp.

The city had already begun experimenting with loose parts at a few of its playgrounds before Rockwell came along. After Hart gave a presentation to the parks department, "We went out and found large cardboard blocks, costumes, pieces of cloth, and things to work in the sand," Benepe explains. But some of these objects had a short life span in an outdoor environment. There really weren't any standard products they could turn to. To design a permanent playground with loose parts, Rockwell Group basically would have to design its own parts.

The designers made hundreds of sketches and began mocking up blocks. They brought on the playground historian Susan Solomon and Hart as consultants. The architects held a number of pilot play dates with children to see how they would respond to the loose parts they were creating.

During the design process, Rockwell Group held play dates to see how children would respond to their block designs. They observed that larger blocks seemed to encourage more collaboration.

The greatest lesson from these play dates, Rockwell says, was that size matters.

"When the blocks get bigger, play becomes more social," he explains. They may require more than one toddler to move them. Another lesson was that certain shapes were especially fun when combined with sand and water. Kids could create runnels or mold the sand with the blocks.

BLANDON BELUSHIN

A Brief History of "Loose Parts"

EARLY 1930s: Carl Theodor Sørenson, a Danish landscape architect, notices that children seem to enjoy playing with the construction materials on the playgrounds he is building more than the completed playgrounds themselves. He proposes setting aside spaces where children can play with leftover construction materials and build their own playgrounds.

AUGUST 1943: Sørenson's first "skrammellegepladsen" or "junk playground" opens in Emdrup, a suburb of Copenhagen, Denmark.

LATE 1940s/EARLY 1950s: Junk playgrounds emerge throughout Europe following World War II, often blossoming on sites scarred by bombings.

1950: *McCall's* magazine sponsors a one-year experiment on vacant land adjacent to the Edith Cavell Grade School in Minneapolis. Over the course of a year, the playground welcomes children between the ages of eight and 16, providing them with small lots where they can dig or build. While generally viewed as a success by those involved, the model is not widely replicated in the United States.

1953: Worried that the term "junk playground" sounds derogatory in English, the landscape architect Lady Allen of Hurtwood and Sir George Peppler coin a more palatable name: "adventure playground."

1965: During a whirlwind speaking tour in the United States, Allen tells *Time* magazine: "The successful playground is one in which children can move things around and make them obedient to their own wills." Her tour leads to further experimentation with the adventure playground model in the United States.

1968: "Adventure Playground," designed by the architect Richard Dattner, opens in Central Park. The area is not a true adventure playground. Most of its features are fixed in place; however, large areas of sand and modular wood panels offer children ways to manipulate their environment. Neighborhood parents rally together to fund a play associate during the early

The blocks, made out of blue foam, are manufactured in the United States by M. H. Stallman Company. "It's a very dense cross-linked polyethylene foam—lightweight, soft, and resistant to sun, heat, and mildew," Rockwell says. "It's biodegradable and can be returned to the manufacturer to be recycled."

As word spread about the project, KaBOOM!, a nonprofit known for building playgrounds in neighborhoods that lack them, contacted Rockwell about a partnership to create playground kits that could be released in communities across the country. Even before the first permanent Imagination Playground could be completed, they rolled out "Imagination Playground in a BOX," a container full of loose parts that could turn just about any site into an imagination playground. The profits from this venture will be used to develop playgrounds where they are needed.

The first Imagination Playground in a BOX debuted at a community center in Brooklyn's Brownsville neighborhood in 2008. "We didn't have to give one iota of instruction," says Rockwell. "You had kids building houses and playing house. You had kids hurdling over pieces."

Overcoming the Typical Hurdles

The term "loose parts" was coined by Simon Nicholson, whose influential "Theory of Loose Parts" was published in this magazine in October 1971 (see "A Brief History of 'Loose Parts,'" below). But you could say the granddaddy of loose parts was Carl Theodor Sørenson, a Danish landscape architect, who created the first adventure playground in 1943. Adventure playgrounds provide a safe setting where older children can build structures using surplus construction materials such as old tires, rope, hammers, and saws.

The adventure playground concept has been a big hit in Europe, but it never really caught on in the United States. A flood of articles during the 1960s and 1970s led some communities to experiment with adventure playgrounds, but very few of them remain in the United States.

"People thought [they] looked junky and said, 'Not in my neighborhood, thank you,'" explains Clare Cooper Marcus, Honorary ASLA, who spent the early years of her career studying children's environments. Despite studies showing adventure playgrounds are actually safer than conventional playgrounds, "people thought they looked dangerous," Marcus says.

Rockwell's loose parts seem to transcend these issues. Imagination Playground looks less like a trash-strewn lot or shantytown than it does a disorganized family room strewn with Tinkertoys. There are no saws or nails or heavy bricks that might give parents pause; instead, the loose parts are made of soft foam, harmless in even the youngest child's hands.

But Hart believes that Rockwell has not created an adventure playground that's palatable to Americans, that he's created something entirely different, perhaps something totally new. Adventure playgrounds typically serve kids age eight and up. Most of the

Where Can Loose Parts Work?

WHILE OBTAINING FUNDING for trained play associates may not be possible right away in every community, loose parts could easily be incorporated into the summer programs many cities already offer where teens lead activities at playgrounds. There would also seem to be opportunities for incorporating blocks into schoolyards, where recess is already monitored. Many parks with spray pads, including Silver Plaza in Silver Spring, Maryland, and Discovery Green in Houston, already pay for staff to supervise the site during busy periods. How much more interesting would these places be if they offered children a chance to manipulate the environment and not just cool off?

years, but when funding dries up, the play worker and the panels disappear. Much of the sand is also removed during a renovation in the 1990s.

OCTOBER 1971: *Landscape Architecture* publishes Simon Nicholson's much cited Theory of Loose Parts: "In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables [or loose parts] in it."

1979: "Adventure Playground" opens in Berkeley, California. A true adventure playground, in the mold of its European counterparts, it still remains an anomaly in the United States three decades later.

1970s/1980s: American playground manufacturers copy the style of adventure playgrounds, using large timbers, rope, and tires to create fixed structures; however, the idea for loose parts is generally rejected, since most American playgrounds are unsupervised.

EARLY 1990s: Robin Moore suggests a more natural alternative to the adventure playground: "I've come to the conclusion that the best loose-parts play space is one that kids create themselves out of their own foragings from nature," Moore told *Landscape Architecture* in October 1994. "This option is easier to manage and more acceptable to the public than the traditional adventure playground built from scrap lumber."

MAY 2008: Snug debuts a line of "loose parts" playground equipment made out of durable foam in the United Kingdom (see "Bringing Loose Parts to a Playground Near You," page 92).

JULY 2008: The Rockwell Group, KaBOOM!, and the New York City parks department bring Imagination Playground in a BOX to Brownsville.

JULY 2010: The first permanent imagination playground opens in Lower Manhattan.

The sand area, *above,* includes a raised sand pit, meant to be accessible to children in wheelchairs, a series of "masts" with a pulley system, and a water feature, *right,* which became the source for a small riverbed through the sand on the day I visited.

FRANK OUDEMAN, TOP; BLANDON BELUSHIN, BOTTOM

kids playing in the sand area at Imagination Playground on the day we visited were about eight years old or younger. In the water area, they were even smaller. "The average age was two and a half, maybe three," Hart says. "These children at the moment don't have any places to manipulate the environment. If they're rich kids, they may sometimes get out of the city and play in nature. But many kids have no opportunity to manipulate their environment with other children."

At Imagination Playground, "children are building off one another's shoulders creatively, and that's something that isn't generally available in a playground," says Hart. "At most playgrounds, kids who already know each other play alone. They may chase

The water area has a very shallow pool with spray jets and a raised channel that children can dam. It is surrounded by stairs that offer amphitheater seating.

FRANK OUDEMAN

once in a while, but the things that are there for them to do are all about individual activities. This playground is inviting collaboration. There's a lot of social interacting going on."

Play Workers

"One of the problems with loose parts that are manufactured is they have to be locked up at night," says Marcus. "In that respect, it's tricky putting them into a public park because you have to pay someone to organize that."

Hart believes it was the lack of play workers that ultimately doomed adventure playgrounds in New York. "Mayor [John] Lindsay was allowing lots of innovation, but he wasn't particularly paying for it," he explains. "The adventure playgrounds opened in New York during the 1970s were often volunteer operations. There was no management, no play worker training. They ended up being garbage-strewn lots very often. I told [Rockwell], it might seem tough but you have to find money for play workers."

Rockwell has committed to work with the city to raise the money necessary. So far, they have raised around $2 million, which is being managed by the City Parks Foundation. The goal is to raise $6 or $7 million, enough to endow the playground's operating costs forever.

The parks department estimates that staffing Imagination Playground with play workers (or "play associates," as they call

them) will cost $152,689 annually, an amount that includes training costs. During the summer, there were six workers, all working full time, and the playground was open from 9:00 AM to 7:00 PM daily. After school began in September, the number dropped to three full-time associates, and the playground began opening at 10:30 AM and closing at 6:30 PM. As of late September, the parks department was still monitoring user levels to determine how much staffing to provide during the fall and winter.

To train the play associates, the city brought in Penny Wilson, a veteran play worker from the United Kingdom. "Her message was unleashing kids' inner potential," Rockwell says. "The most useful thing she did was getting everyone to understand that they need to let the kids do what they do on their own."

At most playgrounds, kids who already know each other play alone.... This playground is inviting collaboration."

—ROGER HART

The message seems to have gotten through. "If they build something, you don't say, 'Are you building a house?'" explains a play associate who declined to give her name. "We ask them: 'What are you building?'" But mostly they just let the kids do their thing.

"The hope is that the play associates will learn with the site and come up with their own ideas for other types of loose parts or other ways children can interact with the environment," Hart says. "Any attempt by the play workers to make it richer than it already is would be a tribute to the designers who made it possible for them to do that."

Observations

I visited Imagination Playground on a hot Sunday afternoon in August. The playground was full of children, most clad in swimsuits—building, digging, and cooling off in the water. In a phone interview,

Bringing Loose Parts to A Playground Near You

SO YOU'RE INTERESTED in adding loose parts to a playground, but you don't have the budget to custom design your own materials. Lucky for you, you don't necessarily have to anymore. Imagination Playground is not just a model for other playgrounds; it is now a product as well. Anyone can go onto the Imagination Playground web site and purchase a box full of the same foam blocks and other loose parts used at the Burling Slip site. The Rockwell Group has partnered with KaBOOM! to produce Imagination Playground in a BOX and sell loose sets of foam blocks. A set of blocks can be purchased for approximately $4,550, and the boxed sets start at $7,600. (Neither of those amounts include shipping.)

Each system comes with 75 Imagination Playground blocks and 15 foam noodles. The boxed set also includes a number of other loose parts. For its own work, KaBOOM! generally uses two boxes at each site. Profits will go toward building playgrounds in communities that need them.

The playground manufacturer Play Core, the parent company of Gametime, is also marketing loose parts for playgrounds through a recently announced venture called Snug USA. Developed by Tim and Hattie Coppard, a brother and sister team in the United Kingdom who have spent years researching how children play, the product is also made out of durable foam, but it is more colorful and the shapes are quite different. The price for this system ranges from $8,000 to $21,595. Representatives of Snug say the higher-priced system will accommodate 60 children at once.

The National Lekotek Center, an independent nonprofit organization that evaluates toys for children with special needs, recently gave high marks to Snug. "I'd have to say that Snug is one of the most inclusive products I've ever seen, and we see quite a few play products throughout our organization," says Raiko Mendoza, director of business development with Lekotek. "I liked that so many of the products needed cooperation in order to build with, so we observed children of all abilities helping each other. The children could create things together, and everybody had a say as they would bring their pieces toward the finished product." Imagination Playground in a BOX has not been evaluated.

More information about these products can be found on their web sites: *www.imaginationplayground.org* and *www.snugplayusa.com.*

Rockwell had noted that the children were finding ways of playing that he'd never dreamed of, and I was delighted to find my own expectations were also surpassed. It turned out that the various loose parts have a variety of uses aside from building. In the water area where spray jets shoot up into the sky, children had figured out how to use the giant foam noodles, which have a hollow center, to redirect the jets and spray them at their friends. Kids floated on the foam blocks in the shallow pool, dug a giant trench filled with water in the sand area, and staged sword fights. A few built forts, but one of the simplest constructions was the most interesting to watch. A three-year-old boy was making a trail using blocks, which soon became another girl's balance beam. Before long, the two children, who had never met before, were working together on a new building project.

No money to design your own loose parts? No problem. A new venture called Snug USA is selling colorful loose parts made out of dense foam, *above* and *below*. Rockwell Group is also selling its loose parts through a partnership with KaBOOM!

COURTESY PLAY CORE

A seven-year-old, Emily, was eager to share what she liked about the playground. "You can make things!" she exclaimed. "You can make your own playground! It teaches us that we can work with what we have." On previous visits, she'd made "boats" in the water and a zip line, and on this day she was digging in the sand.

"My nine-year-old has gotten to the point where she hates playgrounds, and she doesn't want to go, but you can't tear her away from this one," said Suzanne Lindbergh, who was sitting in the shade under the ramp.

"I like the sand area," explained her daughter, Prudence. "It's huge, and there's this water thingy, and you can make all different kinds of stuff. We're making a dam right now. We're going to gather all the water and make it really deep and then we're going to unload the dam."

"For about $10,000, we can turn any playground into an imagination playground."

—ADRIAN BENEPE

A number of playgrounds in New York have sand, but few strike the balance between sand and water so well. "At Washington Market, I have to run almost all the way across the park to get to the water," says Prudence.

The segregation of sand and water is often planned—to avoid problems with sand building up in the drains of water features. Imagination Playground has not come up with any sort of miracle solution to get around this problem. But the parks department's outlook here is inspiring—a little extra maintenance is okay if it increases the play value to neighborhood children. "If you're gonna have sand, you're just going to have to anticipate a higher level of maintenance," says Benepe. "There is a widely held belief that playing in sand is important to child development, so we're trying to provide sand play as much as we can."

Jemma Muradian, who moved to New York from Poland and Armenia, was hanging out on the stairs surrounding the water feature, watching her three-year-old son, Armen, play in the water. "We have a lot of parks like this in Europe," she noted, "and this is the first time that I see that there's something done with a thought to a baby."

She seems particularly impressed by the blocks. "He made this," says Muradian, pointing to a meandering line of blocks. "He could be like a future architect, just because of these elements."

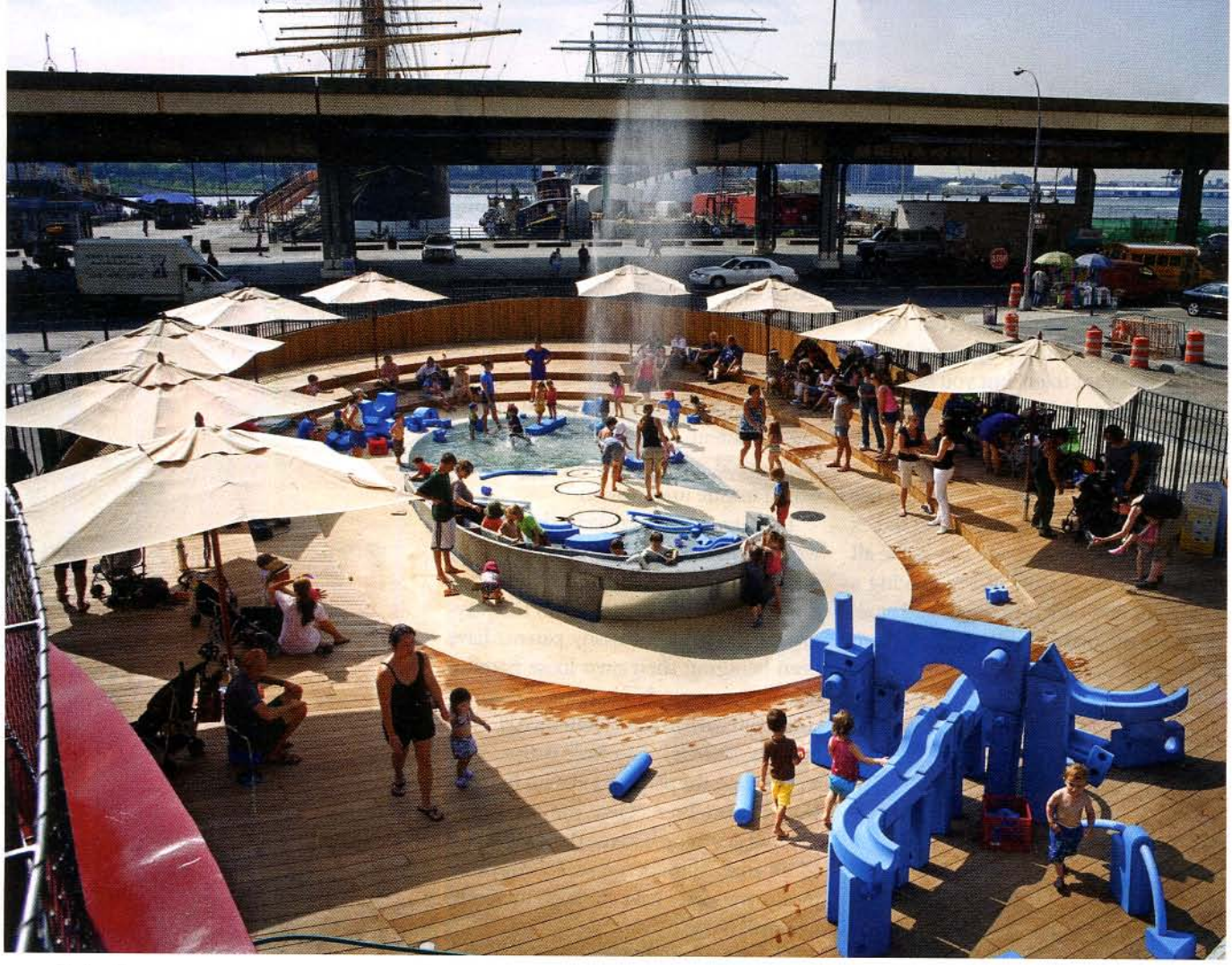
"These blocks are just great," Maria Ho, another parent, agrees. "I think they did a really good job in creating shapes that would inspire imagination."

The large blocks, buckets, shovels, and wheelbarrows provided were praised by many, but I made an interesting discovery while talking to parents on the playground. It turns out many parents have been bringing their own loose parts to other playgrounds for years. "A lot of times you have to bring your own stuff—buckets, shovels," says Erik Bierge, who was visiting the playground with his two-year-old daughter. "Here you don't have to bring anything because they've provided all that," Lindbergh says. "And that means you don't have to drag any sandy, wet stuff home."

The playground's proximity to a restroom was a major selling point for just about every parent I spoke with, but the amount of shade got mixed marks. While some praised the shady areas created by umbrellas and under the ramp, others wished there were more natural shade, especially in those areas where children play. "They should put trees in, because this is so hot," says Muradian. "The kids should have a little bit of shadow."

The complete lack of natural vegetation at Imagination Playground generally surprised me. As Hart notes, it seems contrary to everything that's been happening in playgrounds for the past decade.

"[New York's landmarks commission] did not want a lot of trees where the slip had been," Rockwell explains. "They wanted to encourage the landscaping to be around the perimeter. We've gone back to [the landmarks commission], and they seem to be open to adding more trees on the inside." In the meantime, there are plans to add shade trees along the edge of the site once the heat breaks in October.



Umbrellas provide shade to parents visiting Imagination Playground, but the lack of natural shade and vegetation is a common criticism.

When asked what could be improved, people most commonly requested a concession stand where they could get drinks and snacks. There didn't seem to be many kids using the sound sculpture when I visited. But the comments were overwhelmingly positive. "It's just about the coolest playground going," says Lindbergh.

The city is exploring permanent imagination playgrounds in other boroughs. "Rockwell has indicated he's interested in designing another one for us," says Benepe. And the next playground probably won't cost nearly as much. "We've realized we can take the concepts of Imagination Playground and replicate them at much cheaper cost where we are not constrained by a landmark district," Benepe explains. Ten boxed sets are already touring playgrounds in all five boroughs. "For about $10,000, we can turn any playground into an imagination playground," Benepe says.

PROJECT CREDITS **Owner:** New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. **Architecture/industrial design:** Rockwell Group, New York (David Rockwell, founder and CEO; Marc Hacker, strategy director; Carmen Aguilar and Barry Richards, principals in charge; Glenn Fulk, project manager/project architect; Leslie Armstrong, project manager; Mala Parikh, project architect; Sterling McMurrin and Claudia Opel, architecture project team; Caroline Kim, Student ASLA, Shunyi Wu, Cas Holman, and Lucinda Waite, industrial design project team). **Play consultant:** Roger A. Hart, director, Center for Human Environments and Children's Environments Research Group, the Graduate Center at City University of New York. **Playground consultant:** Susan G. Solomon, Princeton, New Jersey. **Play work consultant:** Penny Wilson, London. **Structural engineers:** Arup, New York, and Rodney D. Gibble Consulting Engineers, New York. **Civil engineer and mechanical, electrical, plumbing (MEP) engineer:** Arup, New York. **General contractor:** Trocom Construction Corporation, Maspeth, New York. **Specifications:** Construction Specifications Inc., Morganville, New Jersey. **Cost estimating:** LiRo Group, Syosset, New York. **Waterproofing consultant:** tmt Restoration Architect PC, New York.

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