Playgrounds Gone Wild

The era of the skill-challenging, danger-embracing, starchitect-designed play zone has dawned, and the city’s children are the better for it.

By Justin Davidson

If children could sculpt a landscape to their liking, it would probably feature a big, shiny mound like the one adorning the seven-month-old playground at Union Square. This magnificently minimalist stainless-steel hump is a tough climb. Kids hurl themselves up it, legs churning, trying to get purchase on the slick skin. Once they have conquered its summit, they leap, roll, or slide off, occasionally taking out other children on the way down.

After years of creating playgrounds that placated alarmists and muffled thrills, the Parks Department has rediscovered the joys of risk. You might see the slipperly slope at Union Square as well, a slippery slope, leading to a wave of recklessness and lawsuits. (And yes, parents recently complained that the overheated metal was scalding little palms and thighs—it’s since been shaded with a canopy.) But the dome provides children with something crucial: a bracing challenge. It issues a license to fall and fail.

New York’s playgrounds are getting less predictable, more imaginative, and more complex, making the city a national leader in showing children a good time. “Other big cities are playing catch-up,” says Darell Hammond, CEO of the Washington, D.C.-based playground-advocacy organization KaBoom! Indeed, children’s zones are becoming opportunities for design virtuosity. Frank Gehry has been cooking up some wavy canopies for a planned playground in Battery Park. And next month, the city will inaugurate David Rockwell’s Imagination Playground at Burling Slip, a cornucopia of dense blue foam blocks that young builders can use to erect space stations, fashion corrals, and practice impromptu teamwork.

Beyond those showcase projects, the city’s attitude toward play is being nudged along by the deft and prolific landscape architects at Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, who are pioneering the integration of play into complex mixtures of landscape and public space. They installed that dome at Union Square and also designed the lushly verdant Teardrop Park in Battery Park City. In this secret, almost primeval place, toddlers splash in artificial rapids or plummet into a sandpit from an extra-tall slide, while their grown-up escorts monitor them from a lookout platform, sprawled on bleachers, or perch, nymphlike, on artfully positioned boulders.

If a playground can be a manifesto, the riverfront wonderland that Van Valkenburgh designed at Pier 6, in the still-developing Brooklyn Bridge Park, represents a stirring declaration of urban glee. It will look a little windswept until the fledgling trees provide a canopy of shade. But from the minute it opened earlier this month, kids swarmed the Tarzan swings, the geodesic climbing structure made out of cords, and the long, tubular slide that emerges from a wooden steeple. The mostly German-made equipment still seems esoteric in an American culture obsessed with liability, but the children have spoken, and the message is clear: Stop fretting, and let us have fun.
Short of the actual beach, you won’t find another sand-and-water-scape this big and enticing in New York. The newest park on the Brooklyn waterfront features a 6,000-square-foot plot of gust-resistant sand interspersed with climbable tortoises, frogs, and chickens, child-size houses, a “town well,” and a water-spitting boulder. There are also some fantastic swings—21 of them, in fact, including planks, tires, and circular-spinning Tarzan fliers.

**Sandbox and Swings**

Pier 6, Brooklyn Bridge Park

Nearby everything is scalable in this recently renovated chunk of Central Park, including the blue polyhedral metal climber, the wooden jungle gym, a concrete cone, and a curvy wall in the sandbox fitted with low-to-the-ground footholds for tots.

**Climbing Structures**

Tarr Family Playground

Central Park, 10005 St, at Central Park W

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**Lounging**

Gantry Plaza State Park

Long Island City

While kids rampage over the Seussian structures and two-story climbing helix, parents can relax nearby on giant hammocks, sun beds, cafe tables and chairs, manicured patches of grass, and recessed wooden benches. And if all those are taken, you can just lay a towel down on the rainbow floor and let the East River breeze wash over you.

**Marathon Play Dates**

Heckscher Playground

Central Park at 62nd St

Spanning 1.8 acres, Heckscher is the most comprehensive playground in the city. There are tunnels, mazes, ramps, and chutes carved out of cement; separate areas for slides, swing sets, and sprinklers; and a moatlike walkway connected to a massive schist formation called Umple Rock that’s begging to be scaled and submitted. Good luck making it home for naptime.

**Tire Swings**

Hester Street Playground

Hester St, at Chrystie St

Seesaw plus suspended tires equals one sweet tire swing. The recently revamped playground’s twin tires hang from a tottering metal rod, so you get not only the adrenaline rush of cyclonelike spinning but also the challenge of balancing your weight against a partner’s.
Views
Brooklyn Bridge Park Playground
Main St. at Plymouth St., Dumbo

The Dumbo park's justifiably popular three-masted ship bedecked with portholes, tunnels, poles, and slides pales in comparison to the vista: the soaring Brooklyn Bridge to the south, the rumbling Manhattan Bridge to the north, and a steady stream of barges and tugboats slicing through the river in the middle.

Save
Billy Johnson Playground
60th St. at Fifth Ave.

Kids might have to wait behind a dozen or more would-be sliders before they get their turn on the 45-foot-long, impressively slippery granite chute off Fifth Avenue. But, as is the case with most line-generating city attractions, it's worth it. This is the fastest slide in town.

People-Watching
Tompkins Square Playground
9th St. at Ave. A

On any given day, you're bound to run into a cross section of the city's panoply of styles here: stutterwalkers with equally fashionable toots, fedoras-topped grandpas snoozing on a bench, tattooed rockers, PTA members, and every combination thereof.

Urban Oasis
Teardrop Park
River Terr. nr. Warren St.

Ignore the Battery Park City condos looming overhead and focus instead on the lush plantings, bluestone wall gushing with water, seating areas sculpted out of rock, and fourteen-foot-tall slide that evokes the natural slope of a mountainside. You'll think you've magically day-tripped to the Hudson Valley, which provided the inspiration for the design.

For Kids of All Abilities
Playground 70
W. 70th St. nr. Amsterdam Ave.

Refashioned in 2003 as an inclusionary playground—meaning children with disabilities can enjoy the facilities as easily as those without—Playground 70 has ramps instead of steps, swings that accommodate physical limitations, basketball hoops that can be lowered, and handicap-accessible bathrooms.

For Daredevils
Union Square Playground
9th St. at Union Sq. W.

A frisson of peril shoots through this megapopular playground. There's the controversial metal mound, of course, but also steep slides, spinning saucers, and lots of climbing ropes and bouncy poles, all designed to test kids' physical limits.

Oldie But Goodie
Hippo Playground
Rainier Park at W. 2nd St.

Arguably the most popular playground on the Upper West Side, Hippo Playground is beloved for good reason: It's loaded with swings (one set for toddlers, another for school-age kids), six climbing apparatus, a soon-to-be-refurbished sandbox, shady honey-locust trees, and, best of all, two herds of mountable hippo sculptures.

Rainy-Day Play
End A. Haupf Glass Garden
24th St. at First Ave.

The botanical garden off the lobby of NYU's Rusk Institute is blissfully off the radar, even though it opened in 1958. If parents only knew about the 1,700-square-foot indoor area with orchids, a koi pond, and a trove of chatty tropical birds. Two weeks ago, a new element arrived: a freestanding pentatonic chime that can be played with mallets.

Hide-and-Seek Spot
Ancient Playground
Fifth Ave. at 66th St.

The ramparts, pyramids, chutes, and tunnels at this newly spiffed-up, Egyptian-themed playground make for one atmospheric game of hide-and-seek. It helps that real King Tut artifacts are just a block away at the Met.

Public Space That Feels Private
The Village Playground
14th St. at Ave. A

The best of Stuy Town's dozen playgrounds is also one of the most underutilized in Manhattan. No matter the time of year, you'll get two sizes of swings, a huge climbing structure topped by a clock tower, and a bright-red wooden fire truck almost entirely to yourself.

Jungle Gym
Printers Park
Howe Av. nr. I. 105th St., the Bronx

The orange-and-white multilooking jungle gym at Printers Park is actually a larger-than-life version of a printing press—an homage to Richard March Hoe, the inventor of the "lightning press," whose estate once stood where the park is now. The graduated steps represent the cylinders; the white ramp is a stand-in for a roll of paper.

Fountain
Washington Square Park
Fifth Ave. at Washington Sq. S.

Frolicking in Washington Square Park gloriously resurrected fountain is an irresistible rite of passage for city kids. Though you're technically not allowed inside the 76-foot-wide basin, the park's minders typically look the other way as kids treat the 40-foot-tall central gusher, blasting daily from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., as their personal outdoor shower.