



Hester Street Playground, photographed in May 2006 by artist Maria Antelman.

COURTESY REAKTION BOOKS

OPEN PLAY

When asked about our favorite childhood outdoor games, all sorts of memories might come to mind but it's unlikely that many will involve a specific playground. "The best playgrounds are those where kids are allowed to manipulate spaces and materials to create their own play opportunities," explained Roger Hart, co-director of the Children's Environments Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In other words, kids like flexible and stimulating environments. This seems obvious, but when you look at all the identical, unexciting playgrounds of New York City, it feels like playgrounds have been declared off-limits for designers.

In Chinatown, there is still one that was designed in the mode of the open-ended "adventure playgrounds," a design type that emerged in postwar Europe to reclaim derelict or abandoned urban spaces. Taking their cues from the manner in which children have no qualms about playing in scrap-filled, forbidden sites, early designers of adventure playgrounds were bolstered by child psychologists' claims that open play nourished children's development. The adventure playground movement spread across the United States, mostly in the 1960s and '70s; in many of New York's parks, old-fashioned swings and sandboxes were replaced with brightly-colored abstract installations, in some cases resembling mini-cities. The Hester Street playground is one of the last remaining adventure playgrounds in the city. Part of Sara D. Roosevelt Park, which runs parallel to Chrystie Street from Houston to Canal, it is swarming at all hours with people of all ages doing a myriad of activities, from tai chi to Chinese chess to community gardening.

In February 2006, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) approved \$20 million to create and revitalize six parks in Lower Manhattan; Sara D. Roosevelt is among them. Already, the park has seen many improvements, such as the creation of an artificial turf field and track at Canal Street, completed last summer. In January, the LMDC will direct a new stream of funds totaling \$4.5 million towards the park, specifically the Hester Street play-

ground, according to Kori-Ann Taylor, the LMDC's director of communications. With this project on the horizon, last summer Manhattan Borough Commissioner William Castro organized a series of monthly meetings with a coalition of local community groups that came together in the 1980s to give voice to residents about changes in their neighborhood. The SDR Coalition, as the members call it, includes the Hester Street Collaborative, M'Finda Kalunga, Chinatown BRC Senior Center, and the Chinese American Planning Council. "[The aim of the meetings was] to bring the community together with the Parks and Police departments to discuss improvements we need to make to the park's recreation programming, landscape, and infrastructure, and the quality of community life," said Castro.

The park is clearly in need of improvements. The space is visibly deteriorated and poorly maintained; the ground is full of holes and most of the playground equipment is broken. A persistent problem for the Department of Parks and Recreation is a lack of funding for maintenance. Michael Gotkin, a landscape architect who has been active in modernist preservation and recently participated in Landmarks West's effort to preserve the Ancient Playground in Central Park, an adventure playground designed by Richard Dattner in 1972, thinks that the park could be creatively restored. "The Hester Street playground is a work of environmental design, not just equipment in a landscape," he said. "Once the architectural features are demolished, they could never be recreated because of the Parks Department's ridiculous playground guidelines."

As of yet, the Parks Department has not revealed much about its plans for the Hester Street Playground, aside from the fact that it has assigned an in-house designer, Allan Scholl, to oversee its renovation. Two of their major goals are enhancing safety and easing maintenance, but these should not preclude more progressively designed playgrounds. One of the reasons for uninspiring playground designs is that most cities don't think of them as a complex design project, and routinely opt to acquire liability-

proof playground equipment.

To its credit, the Parks Department has actively reached out to the community; for example, supporting a charrette process last October organized by the Hester Street Collaborative, a local design/build nonprofit, and attended by neighborhood residents of all ages. Predictably, participants expressed their desire for a clean and safe environment with more green space. One story in particular captured my attention: One child told enthusiastically about a park-specific game called "wood tag," where the goal is for players to move about the park without touching the ground. The game reminded me of Hart's and Gotkin's words. The Hester Street playground is a case that should be carefully considered before being forced into a standardized mold. I would not advocate mummifying the entire existing playground; without question, improvements must be made. But creativity should not be banned in the name of safety, or preservation, for that matter.

In light of the city's newly launched Design Excellence Initiative, why is there no design competition? In the case of this park, an open competition or Department of Design and Construction-sponsored process makes even more sense given that its renovation is assured a healthy budget and the park has an active community coalition.

As Anne Frederick, director of the Hester Street Collaborative put it, "You cannot think of improving conditions of public space without thinking about who the public space is for. As for the Hester Street playground, you have to think about how renovations will affect the community. For example, will it be one stage of a process that will ultimately price locals out of the neighborhood?" The playground is a tiny sliver of public space but its importance for the shaping of the future citizen is crucial.

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