

Playground improvements—swings are out

by Jacquin Sanders

The old-fashioned playground, it seems, is outmoded.

That may come as a surprise to adults who recall the pleasurable dizziness of a ride on the merry-go-round, the delight of a swift, bottomsides descent on a slide or the soaring-swooping exultation that could be found on a playground swing.

But a new generation of playground designers—if not necessarily playground children—consider the old equipment stultifying and uncondusive to the development of youngsters.

"We want to get away from the fortress-like effect of old-fashioned parks," says Walter Kocian, a San Francisco playground architect. "All that plain metal equipment offers no chance for creative, adventurous play.

"Take the swings, for instance. Children use them for a while and then get bored. There's nothing you can do with a swing except swing. So they invent something else—turn it into a battering ram or hoist a park bench between three swings, making a bench swing which is very dangerous. That's what happens with the standard equipment. The kids try to do something different with it and get into trouble."

The men and women who are creating the playgrounds and miniparks in cities these days are working to produce areas of "creative possibility." Their idea is that every piece of playground equipment should have many uses and, indeed, should be a take-off point for the child's imagination.

The new playgrounds, thus, look nothing like the old. Chicago's mammoth Adventure Playland has a building lot filled with giant Lincoln logs, a rocket ship 32 feet high and a climbable observation tower four stories high.

In New York City, a neighborhood association rented an empty lot, supplied it with \$350 worth of lumber, hammers, nails and shovels, and then called in the kids. The result: a jerry-built new town with a dozen or so shacks of all sorts and sizes. Another new playground in New York's Central Park features hanging tires that swoop and swirl, a maze of tunnels for exploring and a multi-level tree house.

Richmond, Calif., now has a sort of swamp park with a pool programmed to flood at predictable intervals and with mud the main play ingredient. "The parents aren't too pleased," says architect Tom Brown, "but kids love mud and it's good for them to have a chance to play in it."

All across the country, playground designers have discovered the boundless fun possibilities of climbing nets and "pretend" ships. Sunnyvale, Calif., has a Huck Finn riverboat. The Chinatown section of Oakland has a Chinese junk more than 50 feet long. Both ships come complete with docks, swinging bridges and cargo nets for climbing.

But even this kind of equipment seems antiquated to some designers. A boat, after all, is as unalterably

boatlike as a swing is swinglike. The new concept is to put down free-form contraptions and let the kids do the shaping themselves.

In San Francisco, one new playground consists of four dozen posts in the ground. "We'll drill some holes in them, attach a couple of pipes and ropes, provide planks and nails and then step back and watch," says the architect. The kids can nail on the planks and make whatever they want. When they get tired of it, they can rip them down.

But what about all those bare nails and all those free-swinging hammers? And in the other new parks, what about the child who falls from the cargo net or the observation tower?

Safety is, of course, a factor in the design of every park but many of the new designers think it can be overstressed. They note that old-fashioned swings and slides produce their share of broken legs and arms, and the more sedate types of equipment, like teeter-totters, are ignored by all but the very young.

"Besides, kids learn from danger—it's a part of growing up," says a West Coast playground designer.

The main emphasis nowadays is educational. The old idea that a playground was mainly for entertainment—and perhaps for time-consumption—has been abandoned.

"If a playground works properly," says San Francisco architect David Gates, "it will meet all the motor coordination needs—climbing, sliding, swinging, pushing, crawling—and all the abstract intellectual needs, as well. The forms will be a castle to one child, a rocket ship to another. It will be a child's sanctuary, a place where he can explore and grow."

It will also be considerably easier on the parent who accompanies his child than the traditional playground. "Those outings to the park can be hard work," says one father. "First I've got to push the kid on the swing, then climb up the slide with him, then push him around on that merry-go-round till I'm as dizzy as he is."

Generally, parents are segregated in new parks, confined to benches at a reasonable distance where they can observe but where their presence—and interference—is minimal.

Even so, the adult influence in playgrounds is still too pervasive for most of the modern thinkers in the field. City planner Mayer Spivack, director of the Environmental Analysis and Design unit of the Harvard Medical School, has done a variety of studies on child "play space" and he concludes that even the newer playgrounds are designed with adult aesthetics in mind.

"This can completely miss the needs of children," he says. "Children see things more pragmatically. They don't need anything beautiful. What they need is something they can move, mold, manipulate, lots of tiny things that can be put first one place then another—not only large things they can climb on."

Nevertheless, the ferment in playground design has brought some striking new conceptions. One of these is the "stack sacks" of 30-year-old Jay Beckwith, a playground architect who prefers to be called a "playground sculptor."

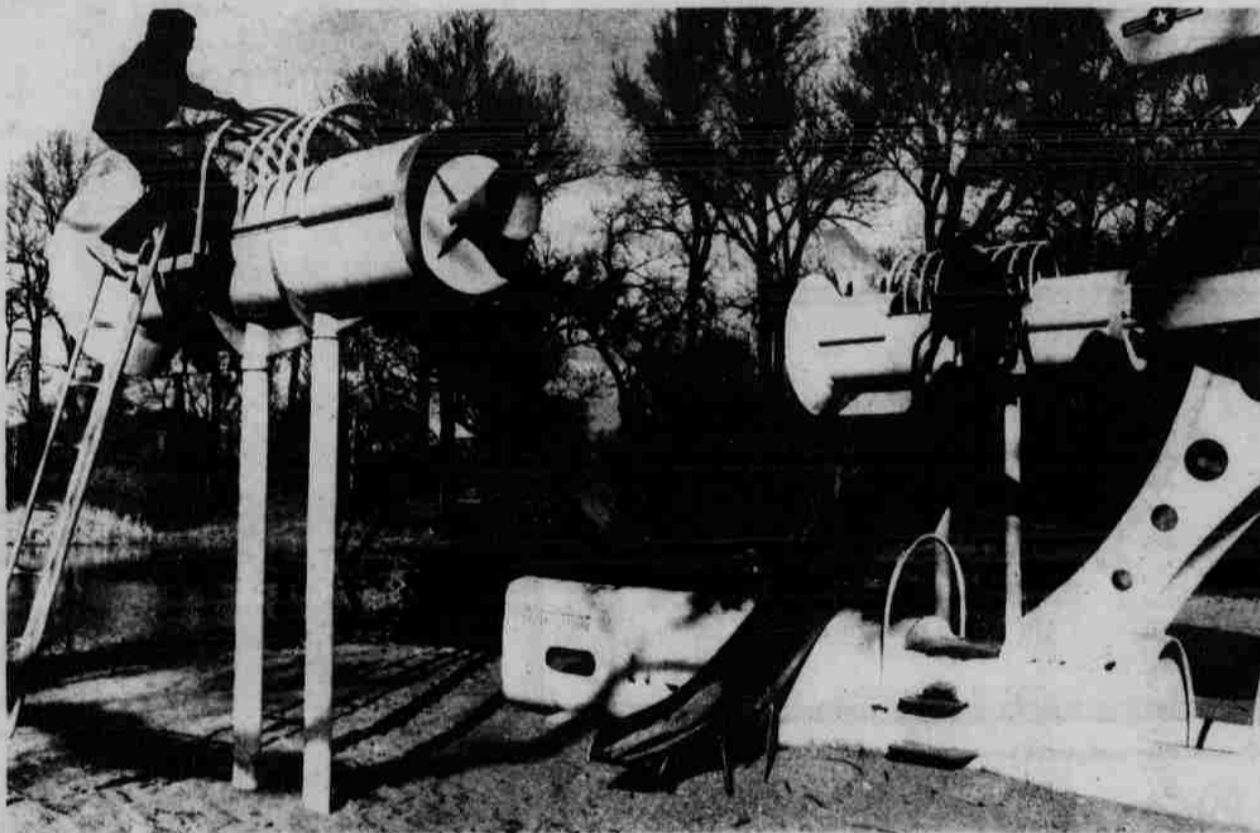
Beckwith's stack sacks are cotton bags filled with dry cement. The children stack them any way they like, then douse them with water. The bags harden into new, child-created forms which look like nothing ever seen in anybody's old city park.

"Anyone can make something look neat, but it takes genius to make something look messy," says Beckwith, who also used old tires and metal poles which he welds on the site—to the vast amusement of the assembled children.

But even this sort of playground is too structured for Beckwith.

"A house that is never quite finished is the grooviest possible playground," he says. "Everything else is so slicked up in this world, a playground should be different. It should somehow say to a child, 'Come build on me—come change me.'"

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