

On Governors Island, Mountains of Junk Where Children Find Adventure

By ANNIE CORREAL MAY 27, 2016



Zayne Cowie, 6, climbing on Play:ground, an adventure playground on Governors Island.
Fred R. Conrad for The New York Times

On a recent sunny afternoon, a 6-year-old boy picked his way through a scrap heap on Governors Island.

It contained old doors, shredded lawn chairs, a decrepit exercise bike and a bundle of metal crutches. At the center were a pile of tires and a few dozen planks, balanced precariously against a spiral column, like pickup sticks.

As the boy, Zayne Cowie, climbed up the pile of tires, he passed an old car seat, a painted canvas. When he reached the highest tire, he ducked between two planks and kept going. As his mother watched in silence, he pulled himself onto the top of the column. He crouched and waved. Then he shouted.

“How am I going to get down?”

This was not just any scrap heap awaiting a garbage truck or a bonfire, but the raw materials for [Play:ground](#), an adventure playground opening this weekend on a long strip of lawn behind Building 12, a stately brick structure that once served as officers' quarters for the Army.

Unlike conventional playgrounds, adventure playgrounds, which date to the 1940s, require only scavenged junk, some adults to look on and a fence — as much to keep parents out as to keep materials in. The children do the rest.

The plan is to allow children to strew the stuff across 15,000 square feet this summer, building little worlds — and destroying them — at will.

Children will get to use more than their imaginations. They will get nails, hammers, screwdrivers, hand drills, saws and clamps.

For children, at least, the element of danger is part of the draw.

“There’s a difference between risk and hazard,” said Eve Mosher, Zayne’s mother and one of eight organizers behind Play:ground. Despite how dangerous the site may appear, organizers are careful to remove potential hazards — sharp edges, rusty nails, splintered wood.



Unlike a conventional playground, the adventure playground on Governors Island requires only scavenged junk and a fence. Play:ground, for children 6 and older, opens on Saturday and will be open weekends until late September. Fred R. Conrad for The New York Times

There will also be supervision. Trained “playworkers” will act as lifeguards of a sort, watching closely but stepping in only when necessary or when asked. There will be one such worker for every 10 children.

Play:ground, for children 6 and older, will be open weekends until ferry service to the island ends, in late September. It will also include a separate family play area for children 3 and up, with pots, pans and milk crates, and the opportunity to dig in the mud. Parents must sign a waiver for children to enter.

During the week, it will become a summer camp, which will help cover operating costs for the season, estimated at roughly \$50,000; most of that will go toward staffing, organizers said. (They're still hiring.)

The idea for Play:ground emerged two years ago, when Ms. Mosher, [an artist](#), was chatting with an old friend, Alexander Khost, [an educator](#) and web developer, at a birthday party for one of Mr. Khost's sons. They discovered that they shared an unusual dream: to build an adventure playground in the city.

Before long, they were joined by [like-minded collaborators](#), including an acrobat at the Muse, a circus school in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. "My rule is," Ms. Mosher said, "if you're ever going to do a project, you have to have a circus strongman."

The first of the adventure playgrounds appeared in Denmark during [World War II](#). [They sprouted up next in England](#), where children had started playing on bomb sites.

In the United States, the spaces proliferated later. Several playgrounds built in the 1960s in Manhattan, including popular spaces in Central Park, incorporated adventure play ideas.

But the city's true adventure playgrounds for the public appeared [in the early 1970s](#), when Mayor John V. Lindsay offered a few vacant lots for experimentation, according to Reilly Wilson, who is pursuing her doctorate in environmental psychology at the City University of New York and serves as the chairwoman of Play:ground's board. [They didn't last long.](#)

Why an adventure playground now? "From the moment they wake up to the moment they go to sleep," Mr. Khost said, "kids aren't given a space or a time to choose how they're going to use it without an adult coming and telling them, 'That isn't safe,' or 'You're wasting your time.'"



The ferry dock on Governors Island. Fred R. Conrad for The New York Times

The results can be surprising. At the group's pop-up event on Governors Island last summer, which was effectively the trial run for the playground, several children were building a structure. "They said it was a wastewater treatment plant," Ms. Wilson said. "They had very specific ideas about how it was going to interact with other houses people were building," she added.

Before Governors Island, the group offered several pop-ups, including in Fort Greene Park, in Prospect Park and at the Brooklyn Children's Museum. They rented a truck and gathered materials from the curb at night.

The pop-ups were a hit.

At the museum, Courtney Rattenbury, an assistant principal at a public school, watched as her 7-year-old son, Charlie, made an X-Wing Starfighter from cardboard and duct tape. "He made it completely by himself and played in it for three hours," she said.

Roger A. Hart, an expert in children's play and a professor of environmental psychology at the City University of New York Graduate Center, said that the current enthusiasm for adventure play in New York may reflect a "nagging doubt" about children's overscheduled lives. "There has been a loss of child-initiated activity," he said.

As it turns out, children take to these spaces naturally; it's the parents who need to be trained. "At first, it can be hard to step back," Ms. Rattenbury said. "They'll rope it off and say, 'Parents, stay behind the tape.'"

"If we want our kids to be curious, motivated, resilient, brave," Morgan Leichter-Saxby, the summer camp's director, said, "we need to give them opportunities to do that."

On adventure playgrounds, children learn to assess risk on their own, added Ms. Leichter-Saxby, who trains playworkers around the world through her nonprofit, [Pop-Up Adventure Play](#). And, she noted, according to one recent study, an adventure playground in Houston had a lower injury rate than a nearby traditional playground.

"They're places where children are totally focused," she said.

The Governors Island iteration will be less elaborate than many adventure playgrounds — no trees or tall structures, no playing with fire. But even the organizers admit to feeling a little trepidation, especially when it comes to letting their own children experiment with tools and scrap.

"The best thing for me is to step back and look away," Mr. Khost said.

THE PARTICULARS

Project Play:ground, a recreation area

Site Governors Island

Driving Force Eight Brooklyn residents, including parents, educators and an acrobat, who created a nonprofit called Play:groundNYC

In the Works Since 2014

Biggest Obstacle Finding a site for scavenged material where children can have free rein

Cost \$50,000 for the season