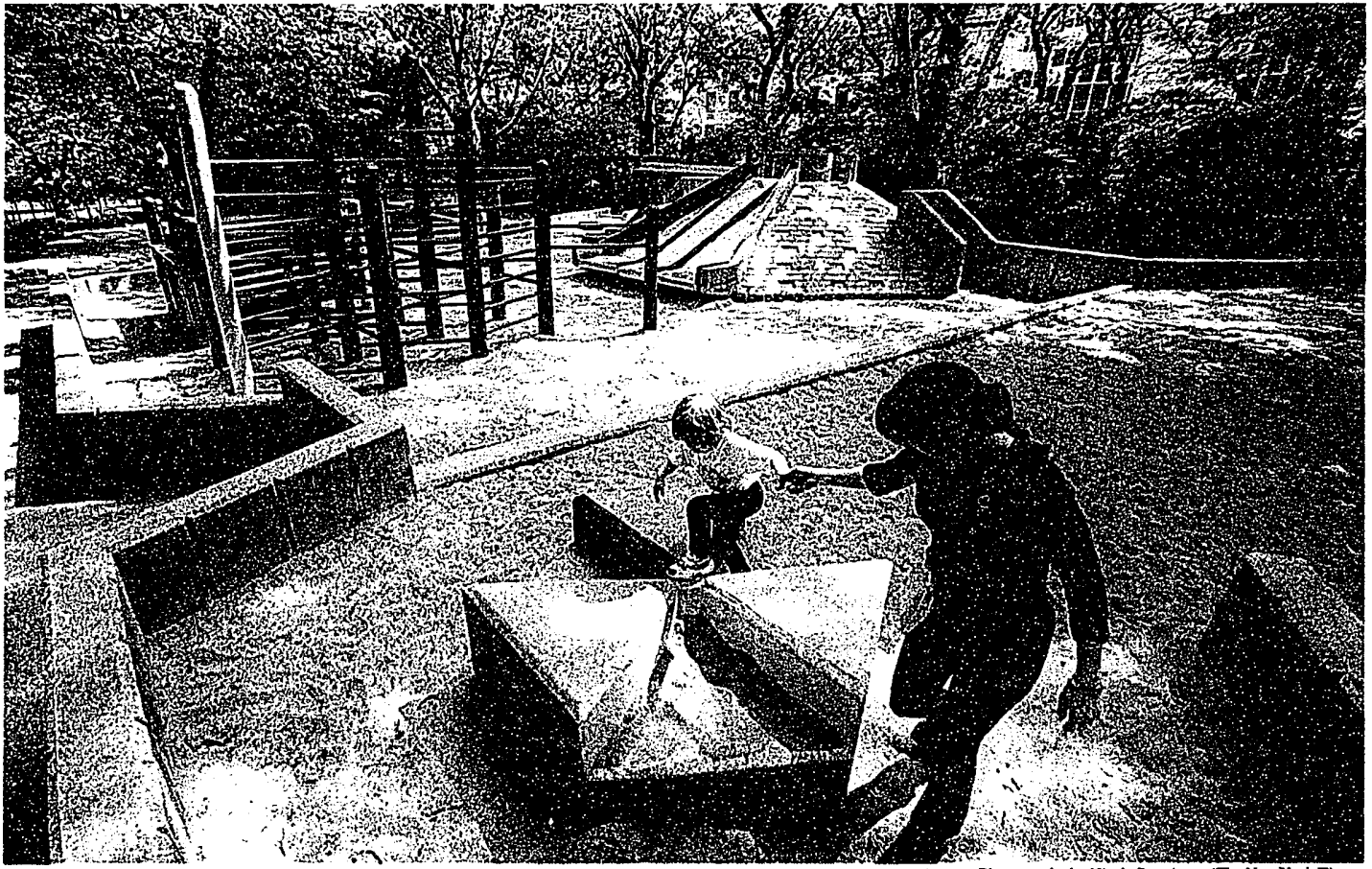


Adventure Goes Out of Style

Deemed Unsafe, 60's Playgrounds Are Being Replaced



Photographs by Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

By BARBARA STEWART

In the eyes of 6-year-old Margherita Cicognani, the twirling tire swings at a deliberately rustic Central Park playground on East 72d Street are deliciously giddy fun. "I don't like regular playgrounds," explained the forthright little girl with the luminous dark eyes. "They're boring."

But to Gail Meckel, sitting sedately on a bench and keeping an eye on her 7-year-old son, Brad, as he raced through the park, the area fully deserves a local nickname, the "dangerous playground."

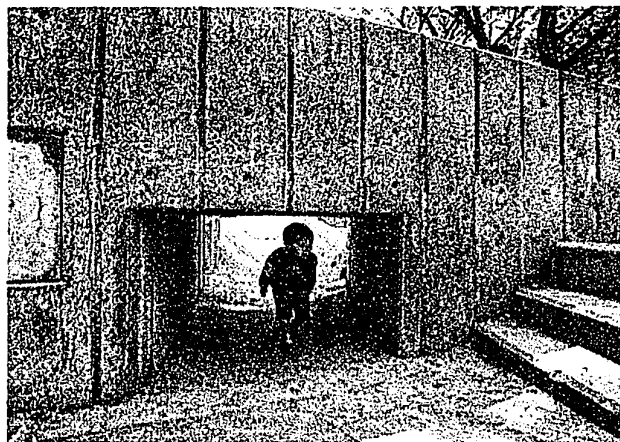
"I'm of the old school," Ms. Meckel said. "I want to sit on a bench and talk to the other mothers and be able to see my child. Maybe it's not as exciting for the kids. This place is definitely more creative. But moms want to sit and chat."

The subject was one of the city's few remaining adventure playgrounds, relics of the 60's that represented a small but potent revolution in recreation for urban children. Thirty years ago, there were at least a dozen of them, mostly in Central Park but also in the other boroughs. Today, only five are left, all in Central Park. They have gone out of style.

With features like nooks and crawl spaces, pyramids outfitted with slides and footholds for climbing, along with concrete walls that undulate through multitiered surfaces, these playgrounds were designed to stimulate creative play. Their style and philosophy mirrored the free-spirited era in which they were born.

"They have beautiful designs," said Thomas Mellins, the author, with Robert A. M. Stern and David Fishman, of "New York 1960," a study of architectural design in the city. "They were well thought out, like someone paid attention to what they're doing. The trees and play equipment and the sand and dirt that were naturally there seem more tied together."

Many parents, along with many public officials, worry that these playgrounds do not conform to increasingly tough Federal playground safety guidelines. Supporters of ad-



One of the city's five remaining adventure playgrounds, at East 72d Street in Central Park, is a place of hard edges, with tunnels like the one braved by Yugo Matsuda, 2½. A \$1.2 million re-design plan calls for soft surfaces and clear lines of sight for parents.

venture playgrounds dismiss those concerns as political correctness run amok.

"We are protecting the child too much," said M. Paul Friedberg, the eminent landscape designer and father of the adventure playground. "We want the child to be living in a padded box. A child has to have the real world, fraught with challenges to overcome."

Three years ago, the target was the adventure playground in Central Park near West 67th Street, one of several designed by the landscape architect Richard Dattner. But parents fought back ferociously, and the site was merely modified. Now, a drastic redesign has been proposed for the Dattner adventure playground at East 72d Street, and the city has long-term plans to eventually renovate all these unfashionable talismans, according to Henry J. Stern, the Parks Commissioner. Although the plans are still under wraps, some parents — and preservationists — are nervous.

The \$1.2 million plan for reconstructing the East 72d Street playground was drawn up by the Central Park Conservancy, the organization that operates Central Park. "We don't



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Adventure Is Going Out of Style, as 60's Playgrounds Are Deemed Unsafe

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want slavish adherence to the past," Mr. Stern said. "Ideas change. Equipment develops."

Under the plan, the comfortably messy mix of structures would be razed. In its place would be clearly demarcated sections for different age groups, with equipment for various kinds of play. At one end would be swings; at the other, a treehouse and a soft-surfaced mound.

In the center would be a little round pool with gushing water, surrounded by an open area designated for "imaginary/social play." There would be a wavy tube that alters the sound of a child's voice, curving walls on which the alphabet is painted and a tower suggesting a spaceship. The Conservancy is to present the plans to Community Boards 7 and 8 next month. According to Mr. Stern, the proposal is part of a long-term project to modernize all 22 of Central Park's playgrounds.

"These adventure playgrounds represent a period of time — much like the monkey bars of the 30's," said Christopher Nolan, chief designer of the Conservancy. "These playgrounds are not museums. They're not snapshots in time. They have to evolve." His design for the site, he said, would brighten the "drab" coloring, lighten the feel of the "heavy, massive" concrete expanses and eliminate potential dangers like the concrete and the crawl spaces.

The aim is to create a space that is soft and safe enough to satisfy the most protective parents but exciting and demanding enough for rambunctious youngsters, one in which children can be in sight of an adult at all times but will have some illusion of privacy. Play equipment rooted in 60's idealism would be replaced by the flashier mass-produced equipment of the 90's in a way that planners hope would not upset those residents who prefer the playground as it is.

A decade ago, Central Park lost its first adventure playground when the city razed the one at West 81st Street. In 1996, when the Conservancy proposed a radical redesign of the one at West 67th Street, some parents were upset — and quickly spread the word. After heated confrontations, tumultuous meetings, a flood of letters, and months of negotiations, a compromise was reached. A few of its original structures were removed or simplified for safety — diminishing, but not crushing, the original spirit.

Arlene Simon, president of Landmark West, a nonprofit historical preservation group that led the opposition, remembers taking her children there when it was new. "It was fabulous, creative," she said. "The only playgrounds I'd ever seen before were just basic swings. My kids loved it, and I thought it was spectacular."

Michael Gotkin, a landscape designer who used to work for the Con-

Hard edges and hidden nooks give way to soft curves and clear views.

servancy but left because of the West 67th Street dispute, is trying to spearhead a similar protest over the East 72d Street site.

"There was a very brief window when artists, architects, sculptors and parents got together and created a playground revolution," Mr. Gotkin said. "It was so recent but is so entirely gone. You don't really design playgrounds now. You order equipment from a catalogue."

Adventure playgrounds were born in post-war Europe, where observers noticed children cavorting happily in rubble heaps. "They realized children really didn't need formal play environments," Mr. Friedberg said. "They gave children saws and drills and boxes and called them adventure playgrounds."

In 1966, during the administration of John V. Lindsay, Mr. Friedberg was hired to design a playground at a Lower East Side housing project. The result was one of the city's first adventure playgrounds. "It was much more interesting to play in than the rigid Moses playgrounds," said Mr. Friedberg, referring to the asphalt slabs topped by jungle gyms and seesaws promulgated by Robert Moses, the powerful parks czar.

Now, Mr. Friedberg said, the city's playgrounds are "in a regression."

The stricter government safety guidelines have changed the landscape of play. Monkey bars and seesaws, for example, are things of the past in urban playgrounds. A widespread perception that adventure playgrounds are potentially dangerous has hastened their demise.

Joanna Carlovich, an Upper East Side mother of three small children, said she is counting the weeks until the renovation might begin.

"Children slip on the sand and on the concrete," she said, from a bench on the periphery of the East 72d Street playground. "The tire swings have chains they hit their heads on. I've seen three or four girls hurt that way."

But even if all vestiges of the city's adventure playgrounds disappear one day, vivid memories of the experiences they made possible will lin-

ger in many minds.

Even Mr. Mellins, the architectural historian, who can cite plenty of sound intellectual arguments in favor of preserving them, is most eloquent when he casts his mind back some 30 years, to the time he was a boisterous child spending endless afternoons in the one at West 67th Street.

"I remember climbing on the pyramid," he said. "I remember climbing into the treehouse, and playing in the sand, and climbing up the cone-shaped cobblestones. The sand was fun, like a beach in Maine."

"I would stand on top of the little mountain. You feel like you're commanding something. You feel like you're king of the world."