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March 9, 2009

## The Lost Adventure Playgrounds of New York

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Adventure playgrounds are designed to facilitate various kinds of free-form, unprogrammed play. They were first conceived in Denmark in the 1930's and took off after WWII, when children were observed having a fine, old time on piles of rubble. At an adventure playground, kids would play with dirt and water and a bunch of tools and scraps of whatever.

Though influential playground designers like Richard Dattner and M. Paul Friedberg created more formal, but still revolutionary adventure playgrounds in New York City in the 1960's and 1970's, the NYC Parks Department has been aggressively destroying them through renovation for most of the last two decades.



In the 1990's, the structures in several of Central Park's adventure playgrounds were condemned because parents complained they had become "hotels for homeless people" full of used needles and condoms.

By 1999, the adventure playgrounds were being "improved" out of existence because of [daddytypes.com/.../the\\_lost\\_adventure\\_...](http://daddytypes.com/.../the_lost_adventure_...)

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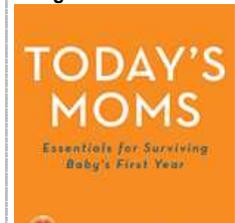
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concerns about hard surfaces and possible lawsuits. Moms wanted structures that had no obstructed views so they could [sit and chat with each other](#).



Now, Dattner's adventure playground in Central Park on West 67th street is a compromised shell of its original concept, and the greatest remaining throwback playground, the pyramids-in-a-sea-of-sand Egyptian Playground just north of the Metropolitan Museum, was razed last year.

All this troubled history with letting city kids have some free-range play is just prelude to the unbelievable images of a serious adventure playground in Manhattan from William H. Whyte's 1980 film, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Whyte, who went by his middle name, Holly, wrote *The Organization Man*. Then after a formative stint working on NYC's Planning Commisison in the late 1960's, he began the Street Life Project, to research and evaluate the effective use of urban spaces. [\[via kottke\]](#)



Starting with playgrounds in the early 1970's and then moving on to plazas and public spaces, Whyte published *TSLoSUS* and put out a movie, which he narrated. [The 10-min clip above is just awesome.](#)

To these untrained eyes, this adventure playground looks an awful lot like a vacant lot filled with debris and a mound of dirt. And the kid in the plaid pants' play pattern looks an awful lot like breaking down an orange crate with a hammer. From what I can gather, it was on East 100th St. in Spanish Harlem. There was a Times story from the era that

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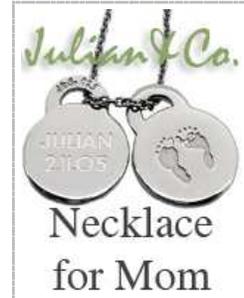
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chirpily led off with, "Slum children build their own adventure playground in the Bronx." Which makes me wonder how much criticism of adventure playgrounds is tainted by class perceptions, and how much playground "improvement" and "upgrading" was fueled by uninformed gentrification.

Which closes the ironic loop perfectly as we wait for the opening of schlock chic restaurant designer David Rockwell's brand-new, privately funded, old-school adventure playground in the Financial District, just in time for playing in vacant lots to come back into fashion.

posted March 9, 2009 12:15 AM | [add to del.icio.us](#) | [digg this](#)

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[funda62](#) | [March 9, 2009 1:17 AM](#) | [Reply](#)

Oh so that is what they are called. They have these in Germany and are just fantastic. Kids have so much fun getting wet and dirty even if it makes parents cringe. Here in Korea all the playgrounds are covered with a soft plastic sponge type material. Not nearly as fun.

[GFR](#) | [March 9, 2009 2:13 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

If you haven't seen the entire film by Whyte, it is well worth viewing. I show it every year in a class about the film and photography of urban space because they use time-lapse photography and various methods of observation so well and come to such surprising conclusions. At least they were surprising to the conventional wisdom of the day. In many ways "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces" reads like a cinematic version of Jane Jacobs' "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," which argued that city-planner-designed parks were frequently less safe and had fewer positive side effects than allowing kids to play on sidewalks, in vacant lots, etc.

[Samantha Scroggie](#) | [March 9, 2009 7:06 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

We are lucky to live just down the street from Dufferin Grove Park, in Toronto. The "sand pit" is Adventure Playground complete with kid-size shovels, runnign water, and logs. Hurray for a park that the local community took rescued from neglect and decline.

<http://dufferinpark.ca/play/wiki/wiki.php?n=Sandpit.FrontPage>

[Aga](#) | [March 9, 2009 10:04 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

I would like to ask, what are the best playgrounds in NYC at the moment?

[greg](#) replied to [comment from Aga](#) | [March 9, 2009 11:58 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

the kid's favorite is [Billy Johnson](#), the rustic playground just north of the central park zoo, on 5th ave & 67th st, which has an awesome stone slide and a huge sand pit. huge.

[Joe Zydeco](#) | [March 10, 2009 2:39 PM](#) | [Reply](#)

Man, I have great memories of one of these. I lived in the NW suburbs of Chicago and one summer the park next to my house ran a "build your own thing" program.

It was a pile of donated rubble and construction scrap, along with a unemployed carpenter who supervised the lot all day and offered advice on building things and generally staying two steps ahead of certain death and dismemberment.

My best memory was taking the surplus phone cable and building a 30-foot slide for life from the top of a tree. Yes, they let us do this. I was probably 10 at the time. Can you imagine that happening today?

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