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Ten years ago Britain had a dozen adventure playgrounds, all but two in London. Now there are about 100 in London, 150 elsewhere. But still more are needed if the children of our big cities - especially the high-rise generation - are to know the real meaning of play. Susan Raven reports.

Treasure islands

The first adventure playgrounds were established in London under the wing of the National Playing Fields Association in the 1950s, through the inspiration of the late Lady Allen of Hurtwood, who got the idea from Scandinavia. She always stressed that unlike conventional playgrounds they should not be concreted over: it was essential to have plenty of bare earth on which to dig, build and muck about.

Indeed, the huge wooden constructions erected by staff and kids together out of builder's yard scrap and planted deep in the ground have become their trademark. These homemade structures are a combination of tree-house, walkways, and enormous slides, festooned with nets, ropes, swings, old rubber tyres, and often dazzlingly painted: ambitious, imaginative, and fun.

Unlike the old municipal playgrounds, there have always been staff. "Their job," says Richard Fleck, chairman of the London Adventure Playgrounds Association, "is basically to provide kids with a degree of non-authoritarian guidance, which permits them to do what they want within commonsense limits: let them have bonfires, but don't let them burn the playground down."

He says it is quite wrong to try to measure the playgrounds' success in terms of a drop in vandalism or petty thefts in the neighbourhood - although they certainly provide somewhere for children to go in the school holidays and out of school hours. Their primary aim is to offer a chance for creative play and a taste of adventure.

The very first playground, Lollards, in Lambeth, started with little more than a workman's wooden hut. But gradually playgrounds have acquired bigger and better buildings, an area of hardstanding for ball games, and variations of their own. Many playgrounds can and certainly should run clubs for the under-fives and their mothers, evenings for old age pensioners, disco clubs, table tennis rooms or art lessons for teenagers.

Hornimans Adventure Playground in Kensal Town, London, has a three-legged sheep, several rabbits, a grouse, a hen, a hamster, a cat and two budgies. Interaction in Kentish Town even runs several ponies and a cow. Notting Hill Adventure Playground features a long corrugated lean-to which houses a workshop, where steel drums are turned into musical instruments in time for the Notting Hill carnival.

In other words, every adventure playground has its own character. But what they all have in common is that patch of mostly bare earth fenced off from the outside world, a building of some sort for tools and equipment, lavatories and shelter from the rain, and towering above everything the huge structure. The safety record, incidentally, is excellent: a good adventure playground has no difficulty getting insurance - which is a must.

Adventure playgrounds originally grew out of local voluntary work, and many are still 'independent' in that they are run by voluntary management bodies. Others are run by local boroughs and their management committees are made up of representatives of official bodies.

Below, the ideal adventure playground, on an old bomb-site leased rent-free from the local council. A friendly builder is off-loading some old floorboards - and granny comes too.

