

British native has soft spot for playgrounds

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Kenneth Young specializes in soft assault courses, and he has found more call for them in New York state than in all of England, his native country.

Young, a 26-year-old environmental designer, creates and installs padded interior playgrounds, particularly in institutions for mentally disturbed or developmentally disabled children and adults.

He has devised a number of engaging phrases to describe the playgrounds, including "soft assault course," "soft space" and "forgiving ambience." Proof of his labeling is on view at the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, where Young has outfitted adjoining rooms on the second floor of Building 2 in primary colors and vinyl.

Whatever assault goes on in these rooms is directed at inanimate objects and is, Young believes, conducive to developmental center residents' well being.

"The playgrounds are a secure, safe environment for recreational therapy which, in fact, the staff enjoy just as much as the residents," Young says. "If a resident is not alert enough to initiate his own action, the equipment will motivate the staff to initiate."

Modular, geometric shapes in various sizes, some hanging from the ceiling like a forest of punching bags, comprise the playgrounds. Each component is squashy, and even walls and floors are wrapped in four to six inches of polyethylene foam. The heavy vinyl skin on each part was cautiously fabricated, it's non-toxic, anti-bacterial, fire retardant and "made in the U.S.A."

"New Jersey," Young points out, "has an abundance of plastic manufacturers. Our only letdown is that we are an oil-based product."

Young, and his younger brother and partner, Michael, came from England to living and business quarters on Carmine Street, in Greenwich Village two years ago. A graduate of the College of East Anglia, Norwich, Young studied fine arts with an eye toward interior design.

His preoccupation with playgrounds was sparked while working as a summer counselor at children's institutions, where he was struck by the lack of play equipment.

With his rangy build, stern face, and precise British accent, Young hardly seems the type to worry about lending pizzazz to a gray-walled existence.

Nonetheless, he has plunged in, not only at Willowbrook, but at Staten Island Aid for Retarded Children, Castleton Corners, at metropolitan area foster homes and on Ward's Island. Before leaving England, he contributed similar facilities to a school for the blind in Edinburgh and to a hospital for epileptics in Surrey.

Recreational therapy in America, he asserts, is three to four years behind Swedish, German or English programs. "There's less implementation here," he explains. "But people are very receptive to new ideas."

The developmental center's playgrounds have been in place nearly 18 months. Young's services were retained by the Play Schools Association, Inc., a voluntary agency which has trained therapy aides at the center. Joseph Corrado, executive director of the Manhattan agency, has issued a favorable evaluation of the playgrounds, and adds, "If they can work at Willowbrook, they'll work anywhere."

Willowbrook's equipment, worth between 8 and 10 thousand dollars, was designed and installed free of charge, on a trial basis. Young, who visits occasionally, has been perturbed to note that the pair of rooms is generally locked and empty.

Although New York was alluring for its abundance of institutions, Young has been frustrated by the "unfortunate" shortage of state funds. His current inclination, he confides, is to "go west, young man."

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