

Sultan of Swings' Designs Are Child's Play

by Don Best

If you ask Barry Segal which of his playground projects is the best, he'll invariably grin and say, "The last one."

No doubt about it; this guy has a fun job. And a rewarding one. In the company of architect Bob Leathers, of Leathers & Associates, Ithaca, N.Y., Segal has been designing and overseeing the construction of community playgrounds for more than ten years. The firm has completed more than 500 of these kiddie spectacles to date—averaging 11,000 square feet—including recently finished projects in Israel and Australia. No wonder Segal has assumed the unofficial title: Sultan of Swings.

"Bob Leathers designed our first playground some 18 years ago," Segal recalls. "It was built at the elementary school where his kids were going. It happened that a school principal from Long Island saw it and wanted one for his own school. After that, our playground business grew steadily, through word of mouth, to the point where it now accounts for more than half of our work."

Interestingly, Leathers & Associates has never used professional contractors on their playground jobs. To engender community spirit, and to make the playgrounds more affordable for budget-crunched school districts and municipalities, Leathers & Associates sells their jobs with the clear understanding that virtually everything—except the design work and a certain amount of construction consultation—is to come from the community itself. That includes public relations, fund-raising, volunteer labor, tools, materials, child care and food for the workers, clean-up crews, and maintenance.

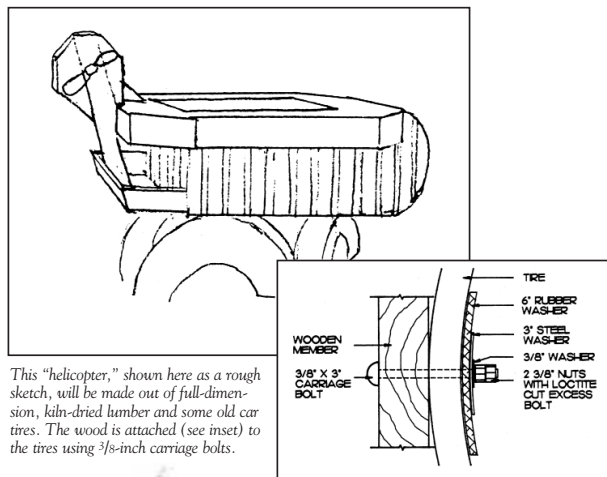
Once Segal has determined that the community is willing and able to hold up its end of the bargain, he starts the design process—where else?—with the kids themselves. Each job requires hours of interviews, probing young imaginations and recording kids' wishes. After ten years at it, Segal has discovered that what's "in" in playground design can vary a lot from one group of youngsters to the next, from state to state, even from county to county.

Swing sets, slippery slides, and swinging tires will always have their champions, he reports. But sometimes the cars, trains, and ships that graced an earlier generation of playgrounds give way to space tunnels, moving floors, and rocketships. Brainstorming sessions with the kids provide Segal with the grist for his unique designs, not to mention a barrelful of smiles. He remembers one adamant young lad who kept insisting on "a big castle, with a big moat, with a real live alligator." Some things, of course, even the Sultan of Swings can't deliver.

Segal's designs employ all kinds of building materials, including pressure-treated lumber, plastic pipe, rubber, concrete, and steel. For durability and safety, he uses only dense, full dimension, kiln-dried lumber that's been treated with CCA-C or CCA-B (avoiding the A, or generic variety) and then redried after treatment. He also ensures



Segal's playgrounds always draw on local citizens as the labor pool. One project involved 1,750 workers. But most, like the one above, in Grant's Pass, Ore., have modest sized crews.



This "helicopter," shown here as a rough sketch, will be made out of full-dimension, kiln-dried lumber and some old car tires. The wood is attached (see inset) to the tires using 3/8-inch carriage bolts.



On projects like this one (left) in Buloxi, Miss., Segal finds it's safe to use only dense, full dimension, kiln-dried lumber that's been treated with CCA-C or CCA-B (avoiding the A, or generic, variety) and then redried after treatment.



Three community workers finish up the trim on a playground "boat" in Lincoln, Mass. Like most structures in Segal's playgrounds, the boat design grew out of discussions with the kids.

that the finished structure is coated (and recoated on a regular maintenance schedule) with a linseed oil sealer.

Safety also dictates the use of galvanized drive screws instead of nails, since nails, under the influence of frost and humidity, can back out of the wood and leave the head exposed. Routing wooden edges with a 3/8-inch round-over bit, a standard safety precaution, helps reduce splinters and checking. Another important detail that reduces splitting and splintering is to double up the perimeter framing members so that all decking screws are placed at least 2 1/4 inches from the edge. This allows decking to be cut flush with the outside framing member and doesn't interfere with the firm's baluster system.

Leathers & Associates' design fees have ranged from \$800—for a low-income playground in Wounded Knee, S.D.—to \$22,000 for a project in Cedar Hill, Texas, that required lots of organization and supervision. Total project costs also vary widely, from \$6,000 (a project in which everything, including materials, was donated) to about \$90,000.

Once the design is ready, and the community is geared up to start, Segal's fun is just beginning. As if by magic, a miniature city springs up at the construction site, complete with trailers, grading equipment, saw locations, latrines, and cook tents. In the spirit of an Amish barn raising, people from every walk of life chip in and build something quite lovely with and for their children.

"In some ways, it's like managing a carnival," Segal explains. "You put up the tents, you do five days of high intensity work that is really extraordinary fun, then you take the tents down and move the show along."

When a community really sets its mind to do something, he's learned, the results can be fairly spectacular. "I remember a job in Florida when we had 1,750 volunteer workers at the site. I watched them unload three truck loads of sod and plant it all in an hour—by hand!"

Best of all, says Segal, are those urban projects where he gets to see a diverse group of people interacting on the job, building something new between themselves, something personal and lasting, that far exceeds the worth of a playground. ■

Don Best is a freelance writer who frequently writes on construction-related topics. He lives in Keene, N.H.