

Play time's



The modular playground industry continues to thrive despite tough economic times.

Above: An artist's rendering of a medium-sized unit from International Play Company.

not over

Nine years ago, *Play Meter* published an article on the state of modular playgrounds. In 2003, we reported that the industry had come a long way from the simple tubes, slides, and rope climbs of the indoor playgrounds of the '80s. We contacted several major manufacturers of modular playgrounds to gain historic insight, to learn what customers want in play structures, and to find out about new innovations in this market.

This month we're revisiting the

same topics to find out how the market has changed and evolved, the most popular components of today's modular playgrounds, safety additions, and trends in theming.

THEN AND NOW

In 1993, Scott Forbes, Vice President of Sales for International Play Company, spoke about the evolution of FECs and modular play structures within them: "The business plans now look at how to become a 'unique and



Top: A deluxe, three-tiered playground by International Play Company.

Bottom: An artist's rendering of an International Play installation.

diversified' family entertainment center (FEC) that covers more ways of bringing in new and return guests without losing the interest of your customer after the first year."

This quote came in the wake of a wave of entrepreneurial pursuits in the early '90s that followed a "cookie cutter" approach to designing FECs. Many were modeled after the popular Discovery Zone center and ultimately went out of business. Since then, the FEC market has changed, and with it, the modular playground industry. These days, more owners do their homework including full site evaluations, sponsorship programs, competitor analysis, preliminary conceptual design, and demographics.

Forbes said, "The best suppliers now consider all of the aspects of the customer's situation and help develop a playground that is more than tubes and ball pools." He went on to explain that themed play such as 3D castles and jungles are designed with interactive play components that offer motion, games of skill, and physical and mental challenges.

In 2003 and still today, the range of play is only limited by time and money, as the best playground suppliers are creating new activities every day to help each customer find an edge over their competition while fitting the brand or concept within the FEC or theme park.

The physical and mental challenges in particular seem to have taken off.



MARKET GROWTH

This year, International Play Company (ICP) reported, "Generally the market has grown over the last 10 years, even though companies have faced considerable economic hurdles in recent years. A number of new companies have started and a few have disappeared. The products have continued to evolve in a number of directions including new educational events that are referred to as 'Edutainment' along with a number of fitness and video oriented events that have been developed using new technologies and processes developed in the last 10 years."

IPC continued, "Slides of any type continue to be the most popular elements of most play areas followed by events such as Ballistics arenas that use blown air and soft play media, laser tag, climbing walls, and the new 3D, 4D, and 5D simulators that are now available. Of course the traditional redemption and arcade games are as popular as ever."

The design and fabrication process is continually evolving. Companies are always searching and including newer and more durable materials to increase the lifespan of their equipment in the field while helping to maintain costs at manageable levels.