Presto, Instant Playground

By ALEC APPELBAUM Published: August 13, 2011

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CAN a trendy retail tactic promote healthier living in low-income urban neighborhoods?

Over the past few years, retailers have experimented with “pop-up” stores and restaurants — establishments open for a few weeks, or even just a single day, typically in a busy shopping corridor. Such projects aim to generate buzz while trying out a new product or marketing concept. They allow entrepreneurs to test ideas relatively cheaply and to capitalize on the excitement and urgency that go along with something new and scarce.

But now the pop-up approach is being applied to problems of public health.

During a two-month period last year, seven civic coalitions in New York neighborhoods like East Harlem and the South Bronx got permits from the city to close certain local streets to traffic for designated periods of time — say, between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. on a summer weekday. Working with the police and other city agencies, they re-designated the areas as temporary “play streets,” encouraging neighborhood children to use them for exercise and offering a range of free games, athletic activities and coaching.

Call them pop-up playgrounds.

The experiment was successful. According to Karen Lee of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, which helped oversee the project, data collected from the sites indicates that families visited local play streets for one to two and a half hours on average — time that many would have otherwise spent inside, according to a majority of the parents surveyed.

Not long ago, David Rockwell, the architect and set designer, created something similar in spirit with a portable version of his popular Imagination Playground, a kit of loose foam blocks for young children. But the play streets sought to engage older children with athletics, not toys, and to do so by transforming the local environment.

Emboldened by last year’s results, Dr. Lee’s department, along with the city’s federally supported NYC Strategic Alliance for Health, is this summer running 12 pop-up playgrounds, which offer instruction in activities as varied as yoga, running, tennis, rugby and jump-ropes. All the sites are in low-income neighborhoods with high rates of childhood obesity, like East New York, Brooklyn, and Jackson Heights, Queens.
One of the challenges when combating obesity in low-income neighborhoods is that the urban environment can discourage children from being active. According to the advocacy group Transportation Alternatives, which has long been concerned with the character of New York’s streets, high crime rates and heavy truck traffic often make such streets unsuitable for play. Local parks too often lack simple amenities like spray showers. More generally, the habits born of living in these environments can create a vicious cycle in which children become more and more accustomed to staying inside and watching TV or playing video games. As Dr. Lee observes, “it will take joint efforts across different sectors” to address the environmental causes of obesity.

Unfortunately, such efforts face many hurdles. Mobilizing political will, changing public budgets, scheduling bureaucratic procurement, waiting out local design reviews, altering the behavioral habits of large numbers of people — all these things take considerable effort and time.

That’s where the pop-up playground comes in. Functioning as a kind of impromptu public laboratory, play streets can demonstrate just how effective such spaces can be, and provide an argument for making such outlets — or something like them — permanent. The flexibility of the spaces allows local organizers to test different streets, activities, schedules and promotions in different neighborhoods, to see what works best. At the same time, the novelty of the spaces can excite and attract local residents, reminding them of the options for public exercise, however in need of improvement, that are already at their disposal.

Javier Lopez, the director of the NYC Strategic Alliance for Health, notes that many of the play streets are located strategically close to underused parks or school playgrounds. He says he hopes that this will have a double effect: first, local residents will be inspired, after the pop-up playgrounds disappear, to make use of these nearby facilities; second, as demand increases, the city’s parks department will be spurred to perform more and better park maintenance in those areas. (Following a similar logic, some play streets are located next to farmers’ markets, to foster an association between exercise and shopping for healthier food.)

Mr. Lopez says that one goal is to move neighborhood leaders “away from the block-party mentality,” in which a shut-down street is an occasion for food and fun, but not necessarily fitness.