



ISAMU NOGUCHI'S
UTOPIAN LANDSCAPES



UNITAS PRESS

ISAMU NOGUCHI'S

A STUDY IN TIME AND SPACE

MONUMENTS, PLAYGROUNDS AND GARDENS

UTOPIAN LANDSCAPES

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PREFACE

Iconic, sculptor and designer Isamu Noguchi was an artist of uncommon integrity and insight. His lesser-known works include designs for playgrounds, monuments, and Japanese-inspired gardens. He chose landscapes as a medium for their inherent social value and as an avenue to make a tangible contribution to society. He investigated the use and function of sculpture and created large scale sculptures that communicate on a grander scale. Questioning the limiting tradition of sculpture being valued purely for aesthetic, he sought a pragmatic and spiritual function for sculpture, and wanted his designs to appeal to the common man. Examination of his work invites artists and the public at large to question the nature and definition of art and design. Noguchi pointed us to a new way to understand art. His work breaks free of a stagnant aesthetic, bringing a fresh viewpoint to the ancient and profound.

INTRODUCTION

One of the best-known American sculptors during the 1960s, Isamu Noguchi was perhaps the first modern visual artist to sculpt public space. He was not formally trained in landscape architecture, but used his intuitive understanding of space to design landscapes that he considered large sculptures. He called all his work sculpture, creating significant works encompassing academic and abstract sculpture, product design, set design, playground design, and landscape architecture. His designs existed in relationship with nature and were influenced by Japanese art and culture. His work was innovative, with a unique modern aesthetic, grounded in a background in academic sculpture.

Noguchi advocated for sculpture to be a larger and more universal discipline, wanting to create art that was relevant to everyday people. These goals lead him away from academic sculpture to conceive of monumental landscape projects. His lesser-known works include monuments, playgrounds, and gardens.

Many of his most compelling designs are unrealized, expressed in models for projects that were never built; yet, the concepts are groundbreaking and visually stunning. A profound contribution to art and design, his work was informed by a lifelong inquiry into form and its relationship to function. His large-scale works stretch the limits of what is considered art and functional object. Noguchi pioneered a concept that is still controversial. He called all his work art, both sculpture and design. Design, successfully integrated into the larger discipline of fine art, becomes a pragmatic and inspirational model for innovation and creativity.

Noguchi refused to accept limitations in his work and was a prolific and tenacious designer. His approach to his profession may provide a map for designers seeking to create work that is unique and forward thinking. His style often changed throughout his career and this diversity was one of his greatest strengths. His sculpture was fresh and innovative, as he was always creating something completely new. A uniquely American art, his work was less about dogma and traditional limitations and more about imagination, as he actively shaped the world in which he wished to live. Noguchi's landscape works are noteworthy not only because they were his greatest passion, but also because they incorporated his largest scope and vision.

EARLY INFLUENCES

Isamu Noguchi was the child of a single mother, Léonie Gilmour, a Bryn Mawr graduate, writer and teacher. His father was lauded poet Yonejirō (Yone) Noguchi. Born on November 17, 1904 in Los Angeles, California, young Isamu spent much of his childhood in Japan after Léonie and Isamu moved to Tokyo in 1907 to join Yonejirō. Noguchi showed an early sensitivity to the visual environment and an interest in shaping his surroundings. He had an aptitude for creating gardens and water features, planting and caring for a garden near his home. In this garden grew peach trees and rosebushes. The boy fashioned a small brook by diverting overflow from a pump. His earliest memories were of flowering trees, a pine grove, gardens, visits to temples, and a playground that was unwelcoming. He wrote in his autobiography, *A Sculptors World*, "I came to know a playground, or open space, that filled me with foreboding". Noguchi's childhood experiences, as well as those of his youth lead him to seek to change his natural surroundings through his work.

In 1917, at the age of thirteen his mother sent him to the United States for schooling. In the spring of 1918, near the close of World War I, he arrived at the Interlaken School in Rolling Prairie, Indiana. He attended summer school for a time, but the school was soon converted to a military training camp. His mother had no funds to send him to a different school. She wrote requesting that he be enrolled in public school. Dr. Edward Rumely, Interlaken's founder, found a home for the boy in La Porte, Indiana, with the family of Dr. Samuel Mack. Through the doctor he was introduced to the writings that shaped the modern movement: Blake, Emerson, Poe and Baudelaire. Noguchi was unofficially adopted and completed public high school in 1922. He wanted to be an artist and apprenticed briefly with sculptor Gutzon Borglum, who specialized in large works of granite and executed the ex-presidents on Mount Rushmore. Borglum was critical of Noguchi and said he would never become a sculptor. Noguchi abandoned art schooling and in January of 1923 enrolled in pre-medical studies at Columbia University.

At about this time, Noguchi's mother arrived in New York, and convinced him to attend classes at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School. He submitted a plaster foot and was offered a scholarship. The school's director, Onorio Ruotolo taught Noguchi academic sculpture and portraiture. Noguchi was Ruotolo's top student, and he claimed to be teaching Noguchi psychically. Ruotolo gave Noguchi a studio space, but he was later kicked out of the school for refusing to allow Ruotolo's friends to visit.

In his autobiography, Noguchi described his guilt at his mother's financial struggles. He felt that this challenge



Undine (Nadja). Isamu Noguchi.
Isamu Noguchi ©The Noguchi
Museum, New York.

caused him to identify and associate with the working class. He believed that an artist's life is inherently lonely, and from this solitude one is able to produce work.

In 1926 Noguchi viewed an exhibit by iconic sculptor Constantin Brâncuși at the Brummer Gallery in Manhattan and was greatly inspired. That same year he applied for the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. His artist statement for the application expressed his desire to redefine the relationship of man and nature.

It is my desire... to ignore man as an object for special veneration. There must be unthought-of heights of beauty to which sculpture may be raised by this reversal of attitude. An unlimited field for abstract sculptural expression would then be realized in which flowers and trees, rivers and mountains, as well as birds, beasts and man would be given their due place...

Noguchi received the fellowship and proceeded with plans to travel to Paris, London and Asia. In March of 1927 he arrived in Paris. He was introduced to Constantin Brâncuși, and convinced the master sculptor to allow Noguchi to become his assistant. He was with Brâncuși for about six months, working in the mornings cutting bases and polishing sculptures. In the afternoons he practiced drawing at the Académie Grande Chaumière. Brâncuși was extremely focused upon craft, handcrafting each of his sculptures. His bronze works were unique in that their surfaces were articulated and changed. Brâncuși had no interest in making useful objects.

Noguchi's friends and associates in Paris included sculptor Alexander Calder and painters Morris Kantor and Stuart Davis. Despite his plan to travel to India, he remained in



Brâncuși's Studio in Paris.
1920. ©Edward Steichen,
Wikimedia Commons.

Paris. When the third year of the fellowship was not renewed, he returned to New York. He was close with the group of artists that became the abstract expressionist movement, or the New York School, including painters Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning as well as gallery owners Alfred Stieglitz, and J.B. Newman.

As a young artist, he worked extensively on formal small-scale sculptures, often portrait heads, to earn a living. This vocation helped him to make a number of important connections in New York. He initiated several long-term friendships with influential individuals including choreographer Martha Graham and inventor Buckminster Fuller, who he called one of his greatest teachers. Noguchi was ultimately dissatisfied with making decorative objects for the elite, finding the work limiting and disapproving of its reliance upon vanity, and focus on the individual.

By the spring of 1930 Noguchi had earned enough money to return to his Paris studio and begin a trip to the East. He traveled through Berlin and Moscow and lived in China for several months. When he began to run low on funds, he traveled to Japan in 1931. In his 1967 autobiography he said,

I moved to the cottage of a ditch digger and applied myself to making terracottas and to discovering the beauty of gardens and the Japanese countryside. I have since thought of my lonely self incarceration then, and my close embrace of the earth, as a seeking after identity with some primal matter beyond personalities and possessions.

In 1932, during the height of the Great Depression, Noguchi returned to New York. Though he experienced relative

success in his art practice, he was struggling financially to the point that he was evicted from his studio. For a time he lived in a vacant storefront on East 76th Street.

In 1933 he moved to the opulent Hotel Des Artistes. He later claimed that this experience of contrasting poverty and luxury caused him to become more politically liberal, aligning himself with the Left in reaction to the social inequities he observed. His political leanings informed his later work, as he created public spaces intended for use by common people.

His mother, after living many years away from him, had returned to New York. She soon passed away from pneumonia on New Year's Eve, 1933. The pain of her death, in addition to his dissatisfaction and lack of financial success resulted in Noguchi experiencing profound depression. He believed that struggle and creativity were inexorably linked and said in an interview with Paul Cummings, "After all, in a sense you're driven to art out of desperation."

This low point proved to be creatively fruitful. He ventured into landscape design in part, as a political statement. He saw his designs as a chance to create a democratic, Utopian sculptural space, a creative response to the social inequity and limiting artistic environment he experienced in New York. His earliest, and most creative landscape work began with several conceptual models for landscape and playground projects. This series of generalized, rectangular reliefs included *Monument to the Plough* and *Play Mountain*. These preliminary models defined epic geometric forms, intended to be earthworks, playgrounds or public spaces.

Noguchi's broad vision lead him to see the earth itself as a medium. Many of his unrealized projects included earthen mounds, inspired by the Great Serpent effigy



mound in Ohio. In an interview with Paul Cummings he said "I had a vision. I saw the earth as sculpture; I got the feeling that the sculpture of the future might be on the earth." Many of his works were intended to be viewed from above, like the unrealized *Monument to the Plow*. In 1935, Noguchi proposed an immense triangular ground sculpture intended to be viewed from the air as people landed at Newark Airport. The proposal was met with scorn, and discouraged, Noguchi left New York for Hollywood to do portrait heads, earning money for a trip to Mexico.

In 1936 Noguchi traveled to Mexico to execute his first major large-scale piece *South of the Border: History as Seen from Mexico*, a monumental sculpture made of colored cement and carved brick. He submitted a drawing to Diego Rivera, the influential Mexican painter and muralist. The

design was accepted, and he was offered work sculpting a relief mural for the Abelardo Rodriguez market in Mexico City. He said in his autobiography,

This is how I made my first major work... At one end was a fat 'capitalist' being murdered by a skeleton... There was war, crimes of the church, and 'labor' triumphant. Yet the future looked out brightly in the figure of an Indian boy, observing Einstein's equation for energy... it took eight months to complete.

History as Seen from Mexico was completed in 1936. At its completion he was only paid eighty-eight dollars, about half of his agreed fee. He nonetheless found the experience a wonderful opportunity.

EARTH AS SCULPTURE

Isamu Noguchi's first large-scale landscape design, was intended to be a monument to both Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, who invented the American plow. At one end, there was to be a sculptural steel plow, an object he felt was an integral tool for modern advancement and westward expansion in the United States. Take a moment to imagine the project realized: a pyramidal triangle, one mile across in the open prairie, golden wheat, gray-green barley, and vibrant green corn leaves wave in the breeze. The bright summer sunlight reflects on a large shining stainless steel plow blade rising from the top of the monument. Noguchi understood what was truly great about westward expansion and conceived of a monument to self reliance, dedicated to the agricultural workers who built the United States. The pyramidal shape of the earthwork was an important vision for Noguchi and was repeated many times in his future work. *Monument to the Plow* was not well received and the design, like many of his landscape works, was never realized.

Following images:
Monument to the Plough. Design
Drawing. 1933. Isamu Noguchi.
©The Noguchi Museum, New York.

Monument to the Plough,
Plaster Model. 1933. Isamu Noguchi
©The Noguchi Museum, New York.

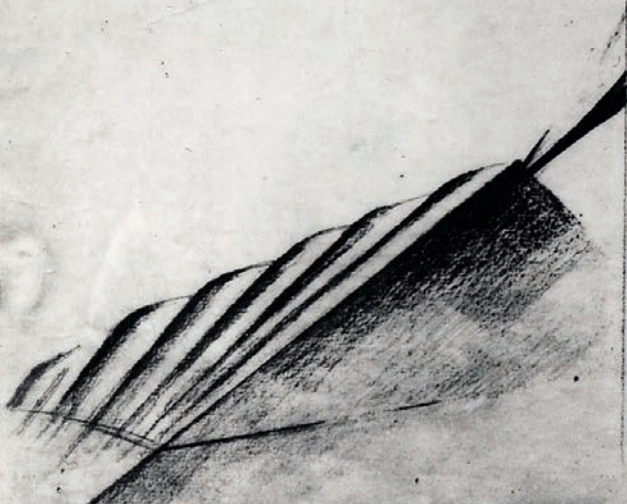


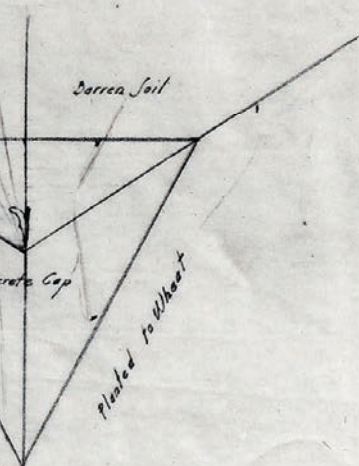
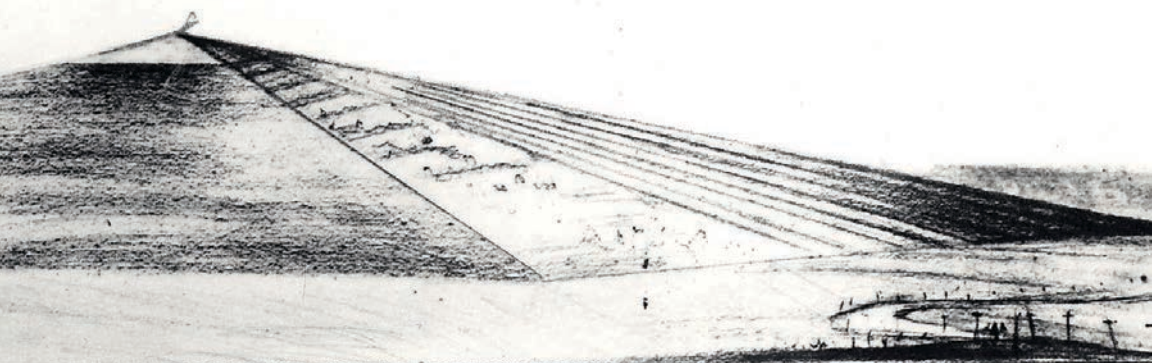
AERIAL VIEW OF MONUMENT.



CONCRETE APEX & STEEL PLOUGH.

PLAN OF CONCRETE APEX





MONUMENT TO THE PLOUGH

LOCATION: In the middle West Prairie on land affected by wheat crop curtailment program.

CHARACTERISTICS:

A triangular pyramid—1200' sides at base—slopes between 12° & 14° to horizontal—made of earth—one side filled soil in great furrows radiating from base corner—one side planted to wheat and 3rd side half filled soil with furrows radiating from apex and half barren uncultivated soil. Large apex block of concrete and huge model of steel plough (in Stainless Steel) at peak.

Isamu Noguchi

1967





Isamu Noguchi's Utopian Landscapes

Isamu Noguchi was inspired to design public spaces early in his career and generated a number of compelling and beautiful designs, which reveal his political and artistic understanding of the world and his aspirations for humanity. The artist's struggle to realize his landscape designs illustrates the reality that the design of public space is inherently political. Author Bryan Lawson in his *The Language of Space* asserts that each artist's work reveals his or her beliefs about the world, which are expressed through the aesthetic and functional aspects of the design. Landscape designs, due to their size and function as an environment for communities, do this on a grand scale. Noguchi saw design as a tool to merge art and function in a way that was truly democratic. These landscapes served as an accessible and profoundly influential medium.



Designed spaces can greatly impact individuals, communities, and society at large. Author Fiona Harrisson, in "Not Nothing: Shades of Public Space," says that landscape design functions to convey the values of a community and ultimately impacts whether individuals are welcomed or excluded from a space. Author Brian Lawson further explains that the character of public spaces, traditional or contemporary, economical or opulent, communicates visually and functionally to the user. Qualities of universality and neutrality are often desired in the design of public spaces, but these choices in themselves are impactful and ultimately political.

Noguchi was mindful of the power the designer exercises over the many facets of a space and the impact each space has upon the observer. When perceiving a space, each person creates an interpretation in response to his or her unique awareness. Spaces have the power to influence our behavior and affect us through both a physical and social environment.

Public places are ideally open to all people, regardless of class, race or economic status. Noguchi created spaces to accommodate a society that celebrated art, freedom, and individuality. He wanted people to experience sculpture in their everyday lives, and public spaces were the perfect forum for this goal. His artwork was intended to communicate directly with people, and in order to do this he intentionally expanded the scope and definition of art.

PLAYGROUNDS AS SCULPTURE

Monument to the Plow was conceived alongside several other landscape projects, including Noguchi's first playground designs. The artist saw playgrounds as a chance to create democratic, Utopian, public spaces. Noguchi's playgrounds were similar to "adventure playgrounds" that arose in England after World War II. Created with the objective to help build a peaceful post-war community, these designs were informed by ideals including pacifism, democracy, and participatory collectivity. Adventure playgrounds encouraged less-structured, more imaginative play by offering no standard play objects such as sandboxes, swings, and slides. Noguchi believed that:

. . . the playground, instead of telling the child what to do (swing here, climb there) becomes a place for endless exploration, of endless opportunity for changing play. And it is a thing of beauty as the modern artist has found beauty in the modern world.

He saw the concept of "play" as a metaphor for freedom and sought to engage the observer's free will by providing

Isamu Noguchi's Utopian Landscapes

a space for unlimited imagination. Noguchi's lifelong interest in playgrounds grew from the precursor of his later playground designs, the 1933 *Play Mountain*. He claimed that the work was 'purely instinctive', not based on drawings or extensive preliminary work. This intuitive inspiration was a hallmark of Noguchi's work, as was his determination to artistically express his unique and forward-thinking ideas.

Play Mountain was to take up one city block in New York City, the entire area functioning as one large play object. To maximize the amount of usable space, Noguchi imagined an inclined surface, a stepped pyramid that would house facilities and play space. The plan included an amphitheater, bandstand, spiral sledding hill, and a water slide that ended in a shallow pool. Sculptural concrete forms replaced traditional playground equipment. Playgrounds at this



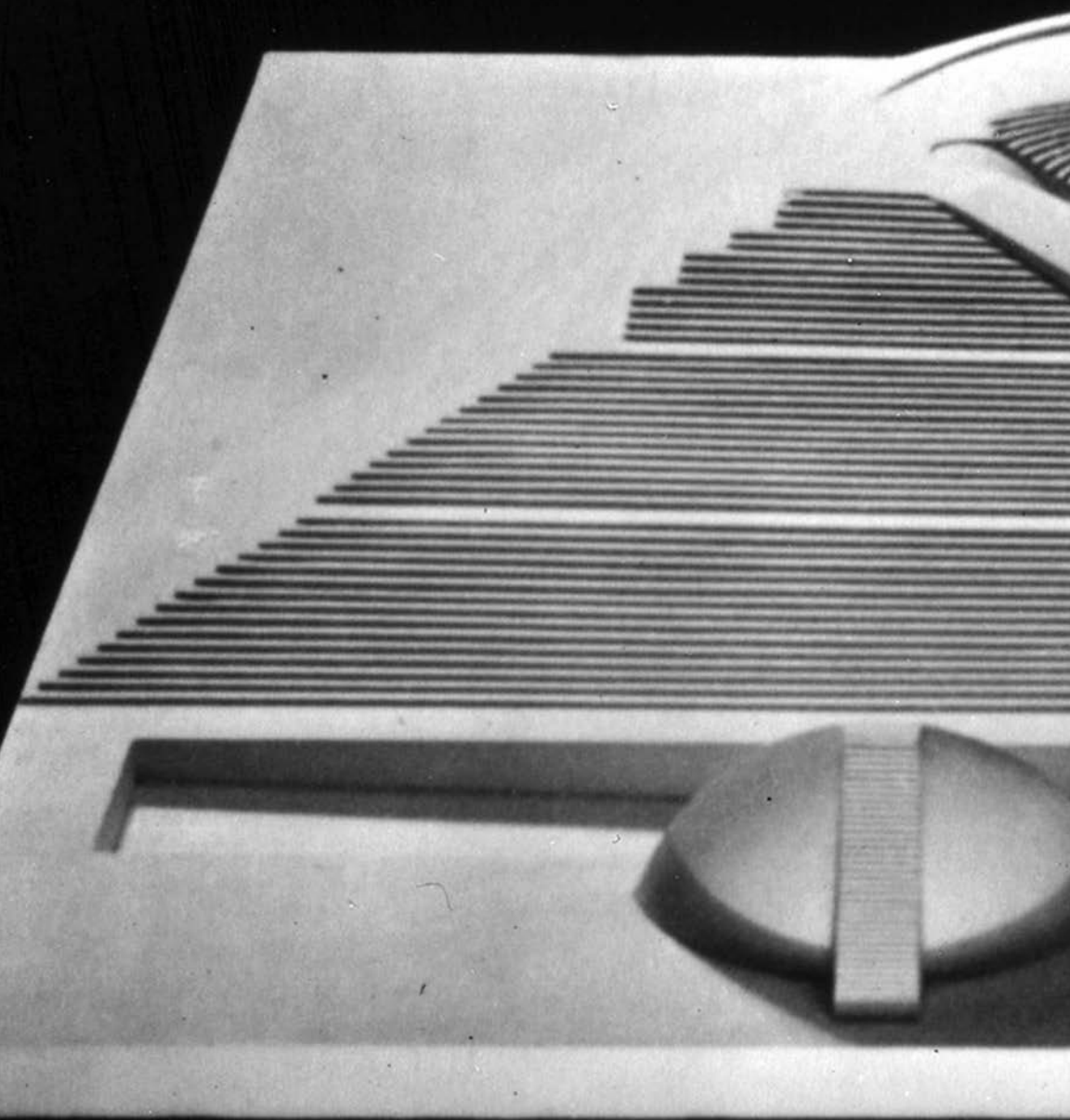
20 Boy's Playground at Lincoln Terrace Park, 1931. ©Rutter Photo Service/ New York City Parks Photo Archive.

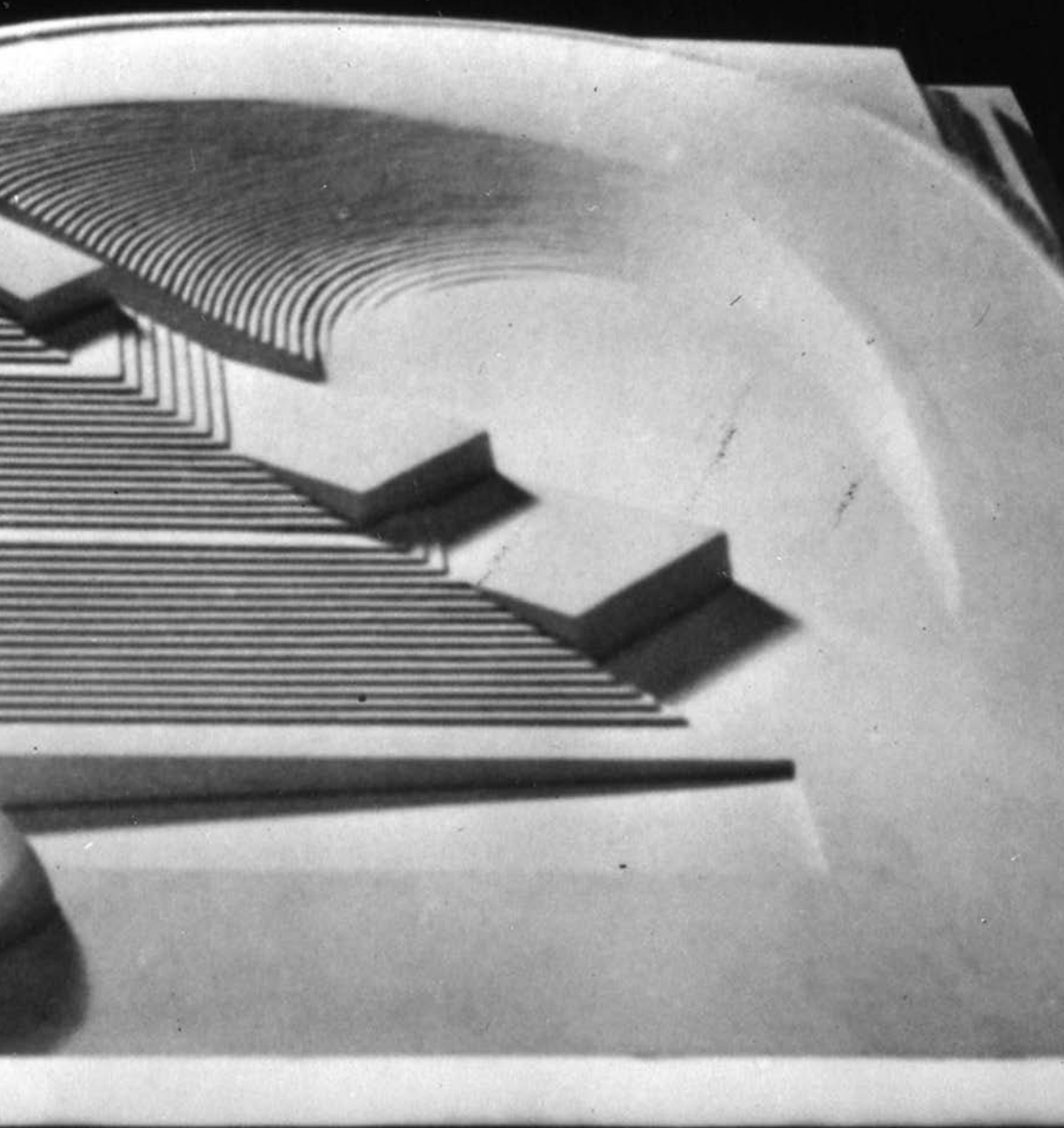
time consisted of concrete or dirt yards and practical steel playground equipment. Noguchi sought to fundamentally change, through art, the traditional limited approach to playground design.

Noguchi's choice of the complex medium of playground made the work inherently more difficult to realize. He dove headlong into an arena that was yet uncharted for visual artists. Author Shaina D. Larrivee explains in her article "Playscapes: Isamu Noguchi's Designs for Play" that design for the commons, intended for the larger community, requires compromise, negotiation and is vulnerable to changing political and economic tides. In 1934, Noguchi presented Play Mountain to New York City Parks Department officials. Noguchi said, "We were met with thorough sarcasm". Though the innovative plan was soundly rejected, the artist's fascination with playgrounds persisted.

Following images:
Play Mountain. Plaster Model.
Isamu Noguchi. ©The Noguchi
Museum, New York.

Contoured Playground.
Bronze from Original Plaster.
Isamu Noguchi. ©The Noguchi
Museum, New York.









A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

As a Japanese American, Noguchi intimately experienced the ramifications of Pearl Harbor and World War II. In the spring of 1938 he traveled to California with Arshile Gorky and his fiancée. The war, beyond its shocking, dark impact upon the entire country, had a chilling effect on the artist community as projects lost funding and resources were redirected into the war effort.

In March of 1942 there was an evacuation order, and he returned to New York. Finding the artist community deserted, he then traveled to Washington D.C. to see if he could help in some way with the war effort. In Washington he met John Collier who was working for the American Indian Service. He suggested Noguchi help with the development of an internment camp that was planned to be located on a Native American reservation in Arizona in the Mojave Desert. Arriving there before the evacuees, Noguchi worked on preparing the facility, but when the internees arrived, he became one of them. He was interned and not able to secure release for seven months.

Isamu Noguchi's Utopian Landscapes



In 1943 he created the work *My Arizona*, a representation of the internment camp and his experience there. The work references both the location of the camp and the demise of the U.S.S. Arizona which sunk during the bombing in December 7, 1941, and still lies in memorial in Pearl Harbor.

Soon after, Noguchi ventured into industrial design, seeking to make work that was useful and accessible to the common man. He designed a unique and elegant *Coffee Table* in 1945, which was produced and marketed with great success by Herman Miller Furniture Company.

Everything was sculpture. Any material, any idea without hindrance born into space... But then why did it have to be fine art? Why not objects of use and popularity? ... Originality might survive mass production.

The aftermath of the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had a profound effect upon Noguchi, affecting his work and personal well-being. He spoke often of his depression in response to the fear instilled by the threat

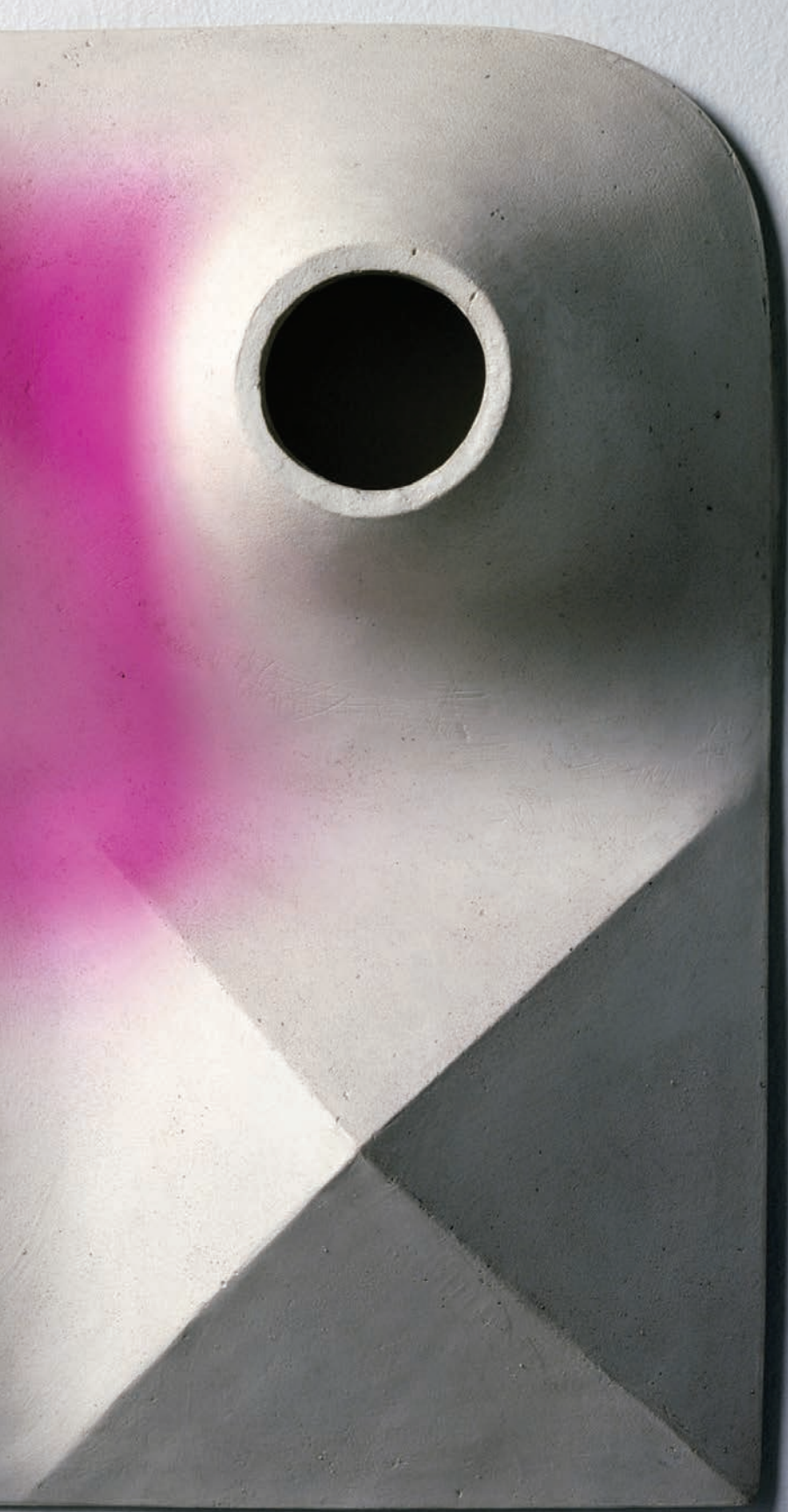
of atomic destruction. He was not content to sit by and be an observer, he responded artistically to this problem by transforming his art.

I devised a plan of action. To find out... what sculpture was fundamentally about, to see for myself its relations to people, to space, and its uses in the past. Sculpture, I felt, had become captive, like the other arts, to coterie points of view. There must be some larger, more noble, and more essentially sculptural purpose to sculpture.

In 1948, discouraged with his inability to realize projects in New York City, Noguchi applied for and received a fellowship from the Bollingen Foundation. His goal was a book on the subject of leisure; however, the concept for the project encompassed much more. Noguchi wished to understand a purpose for sculpture that transcended the aesthetic. He observed that sculpture has been used ceremonially throughout history through effigies, monuments, temple plazas, and dance halls. All these forms are sculptural objects that have functional and cultural significance. Noguchi wanted to discover how sculpture fit into a Utopian world in which people had the time to view and appreciate art.

Isamu Noguchi felt that modern people, with increasing technological knowledge and fast-paced contemporary lifestyles, have a profound need for a new type of sculpture. His inquiry incorporated public art and the function of outdoor spaces. He wanted to observe, in situ, the origins of the use of sculpture. He visited prehistoric sites in England, including Stonehenge and ancient caves in Aylesbury. He went to Paris and Brittany to observe prehistoric caves, as well as the mysterious dolmens (portal graves). These sites serve as





Isamu Noguchi's Utopian Landscapes



32 La Roche-aux-Fées, 2000 B.C..
Essé, Ille-et-Vilaine, Brittany, France.
©Wikimedia Commons.

St. Peter's Square (Piazza San Pietro).
Gian Lorenzo Bernini from 1656 -1667.
Vatican City. ©Wikimedia Commons.

examples of how people used public art in ancient times. He traveled to Italy to observe gardens and piazzas and then to Spain to study Gaudi in Barcelona. He went to Greece and traveled up the Nile to Egypt, to the pyramids and tombs at Luxor. He stayed six months in India and visited various temples, including Angkor Wat, in Cambodia, and the island of Bali. This world tour enhanced Noguchi's already profound global perspective, and helped to inform his future landscape designs.





GARDENS OF TIME AND SPACE

Isamu Noguchi's playground designs and world tour were precursors for his garden designs. His interest in gardens arose from their inherent usefulness. He saw gardens as an opportunity to sculpt public space, moving beyond individual sculptures. He created these designs out of a need to belong, to improve a space, and to make life better for everyone. For Noguchi gardens were an answer to ecology and expressed his hope for humanity's survival in a post-atomic age. He believed that inspiration for successful art must come directly from nature. Thus, perhaps his most compelling works are interactive gardens, complex natural spaces populated with sculptural objects.

In 1956 he was recommended by architect Marcel Bruer to design a garden for the new UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. Noguchi's work at UNESCO was a pragmatic attempt to bridge the East and the West through garden design. Noguchi's gardens were functional spaces that invited the viewer to conceptually engage the ultimate questions of time, space, and human existence. This encompassing goal

is a distinctive aspect of Noguchi's work, he wrote about this concept in his autobiography,

I am excited by the idea that sculpture creates space, that shapes intended for this purpose, properly scaled in space, actually create a greater space. There is a difference between actual cubic feet of space and the additional space that the imagination supplies. One is measure, the other an awareness of the void—of our existence in this passing world.

This awareness of the observer and the larger forces at work in a given space lends Noguchi's landscapes a unique power.

The 1956 garden for the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris is a work of profound conceptual integration, illustrating his understanding of the function of sculpture in space. Intriguingly, he described the work as an "ambulatory garden" and said that human movement activated his sculptures as people move through the space. The observer was meant to contemplate the "relative value of all things." The UNESCO garden included the traditional features of a Japanese garden: stepping-stones, cherry trees, a vaulted bridge, and meticulously placed stones.

Noguchi's garden designs communicated traditional Eastern spiritual concepts through the lens of modernist idealism. A related Zen symbol is Ensō, the circle, a shape often repeated in Noguchi's sculptural works. Carl Jung said that circles were an "archetype of wholeness", a shape repeated in nature and used since antiquity to represent the earth, the Sun, the moon and the celestial dome. Ensō is a familiar image in Zen calligraphy, representing power, enlightenment, the void, the present moment and the entire universe.



In Zen teachings art functions practically to provide insight into traditional teachings of Zen Buddhism. Together, the traditional Zen arts are called the “artless arts of Zen,” and are considered tools to gain spiritual insight into oneself, comprehending the nature of reality and communicating truth. Scholar Audrey Yoshiko Seo explains that, “Zen art, as sacred art, is a direct expression of the ineffable. It helps to transform the way we understand ourselves and the universe. It makes visible the invisible.”

While Noguchi was a skeptic, his knowledge of Zen Buddhism profoundly influenced his work. The concept

of the void, an idea discussed in Zen Buddhism, was a repeated theme in Noguchi's sculpture. The void encompasses emptiness and form, and form grows out of the void. This is expressed in the Heart Sūtra that states "that which is form is emptiness and that which is emptiness is form."

This ambiguous yet practical concept is mirrored in Dutch architect Herman Hertzberger's theory of design structuralism, which considered objects and spaces not as "tools" but as "musical instruments," implying that the structure of a space defines its basic function, but does not limit the many possibilities to play and create different types of "music". The space functions to house activity and provides the freedom to choose. Noguchi expressed this concept by creating Japanese-inspired gardens intended to house people and sculptures, interrelated within a backdrop of natural surroundings.



*UNESCO Garden, Paris. Isamu
Noguchi. Photo, Jackson Wang.
©2007. Flickr Creative Commons.*

*Following image:
UNESCO Garden, Paris.
Isamu Noguchi. ©2010 Jean-Pierre
Dalbéra, Flickr Creative Commons.*

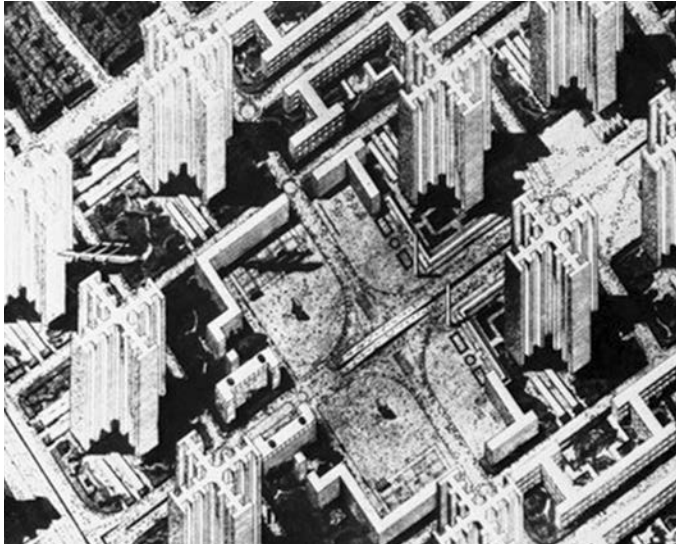




RIVERSIDE PARK PLAYGROUND

The unrealized plans for *Riverside Park Playground* comprise Isamu Noguchi's most outstanding landscape work. Since he had past difficulty realizing projects in New York City, he decided to enlist the help of an architect and invited Louis Kahn to collaborate. Noguchi and Kahn were at the height of their respective careers, and there was renewed public interest in innovations in playground design. They worked for five years on multiple proposals for the project, and upon completion, each proposal was rejected in turn. Noguchi said, "Each time there would be some objection—and Louis Kahn would then always say, 'Wonderful! They don't want it. Now we can start all over again. We can make something better'."

French architect Le Corbusier, whose work was the conceptual prototype of high-modernist urban design, inspired both Noguchi and Kahn. Active from 1920 to 1960, Le Corbusier was highly influential in modern urban architecture. High modernism sought to improve the infrastructure of urban centers by designing completely new systems.



The modernist designer created an urban environment that was open and filled with fresh air and sunlight. The structures that allowed for this included vaulting skyscrapers, wide roads, and open paved plazas. High modernists called for complete destruction of existing infrastructure, to start fresh, from a blank canvas. In his unrealized plan for central Paris, the *Radiant City*, Le Corbusier completely replaced existing structures, making way for vast open spaces and sculptural forms most visually impactful from a distance. While visionary, his plans gave no credit to traditional architecture or the aesthetic of the Parisian people. The design had no relationship to what existed in Paris and was ultimately rejected by its citizens. Noguchi and Kahn's plan for *Riverside Park Playground* encountered similar problems integrating with the local community.

46 Le Corbusier: *Plan Voisin*
(*The Radiant City*). 1924.
Public Domain.

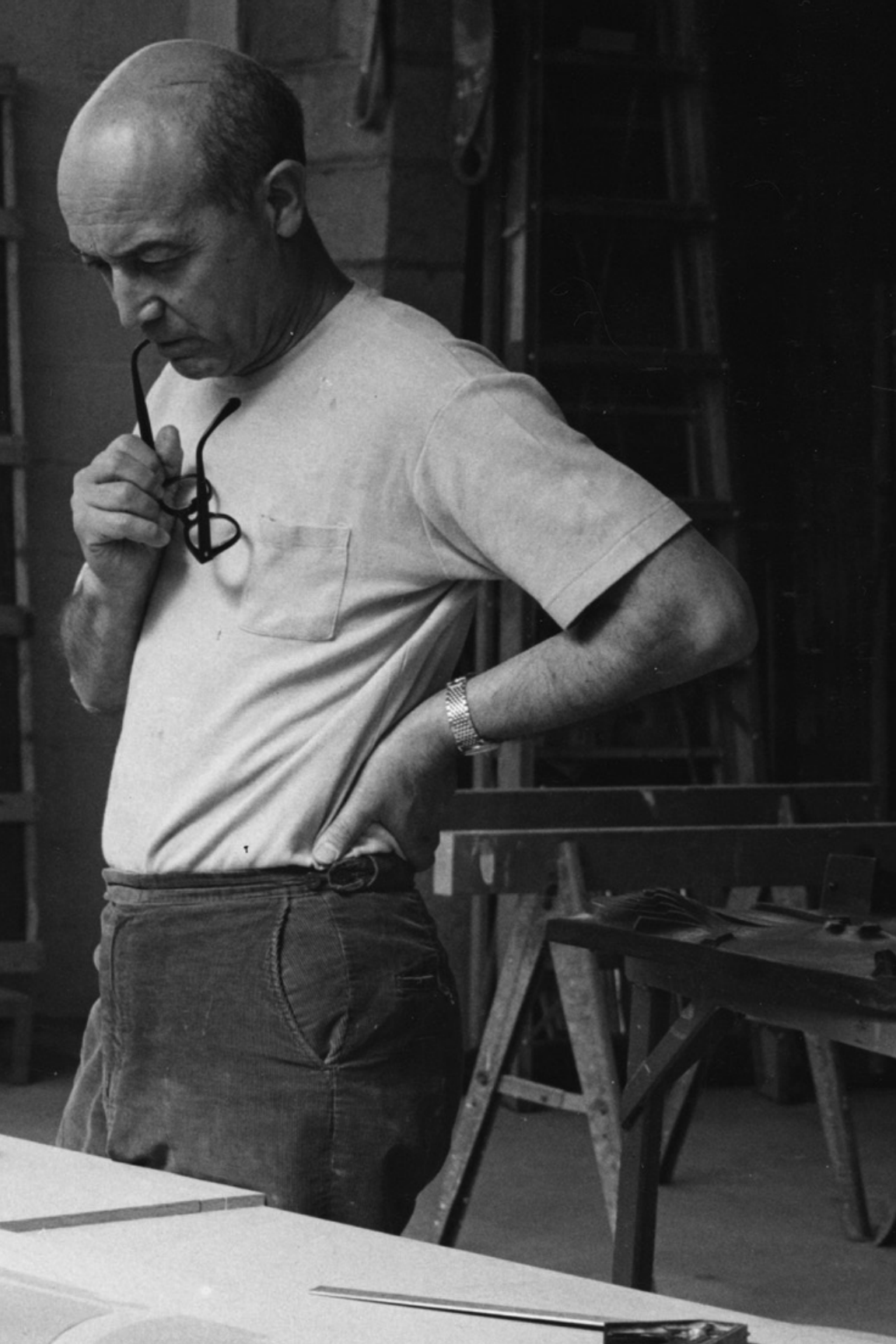
Following image:
Isamu Noguchi with model for the Adele
Rosenwald Levy Memorial Playground.
1963. Michio Noguchi. ©Isamu Noguchi
Garden Museum.

While the initial plan was innovative and forward thinking, it called for a massive modernist monument comprised of geometric concrete shapes and very little green space. Existing trees and structures were to be destroyed. If the original plans had gone forward, a traditional grass park, shaded by trees would have made way for a monolith of modernist stonework.

The design was well thought out and featured many innovative ideas. Noguchi wanted to create an environment that would appeal to children of all ages. The plan called for a nursery school building, a play park, an amphitheater with a stage shell for theater, places for roller-skating and ice-skating as well as spaces intended for teens and the elderly. The playground was influenced by Surrealist sculptural tradition and its forms were derived from the archaic sites he visited for the Bollingen trip, including Alberto Giacometti's *The Palace at 4am*, and Louis Kahn's 1943 designs for exhibition buildings for the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exposition of 1926.

The plan was open, without designated areas for specific sports. The central structure was a massive earthwork, a stepped pyramid that would house indoor play space and facilities for young children. The roof would function as a playground making the most of precious city space. The building was designed to be a suntrap, providing warmth in winter. There was a fountain and water play area for the summer. Play objects were permanent, built into the landscape, and made of colored concrete. They included "a play mountain, a slide tumulus, and amphitheater and finally a sand garden divided up by diagonal curbing to form a two dimensional maze..."





Isamu Noguchi's Utopian Landscapes

A revised plan was submitted to the Parks Department in June of 1962. This plan was also rejected. The project was thought to be too costly, too large in scale, and markedly avant-gardist. Noguchi and Kahn offered another model, followed by three others. Five plans were proposed throughout the five-year process, with over a dozen models created. As the modified plans became less grand in scope, Noguchi became less satisfied; he felt it no longer reflected his vision. Noguchi said of the unrealized project,

...the idea of playgrounds as sculptural landscape, natural to children, had never been realized. How sad, I felt, that the possibility of actually building one presented itself when it was past my age of interest. Why could it not have been thirty years before, when the idea first came to me.



The final version of the project was presented in 1965. Noguchi and Kahn had perfected a design that was accepted by the city, the plan was funded, and Mayor Wagner had signed the papers. Unfortunately, the process took too long, and the project was a casualty of political change. Republican John V. Lindsay who ran on the promise of fiscal responsibility defeated the Democrat, Mayor Wagner. *Riverside Park Playground* was an obvious target.

Modern implementation of some of the ideas presented in the Noguchi-Kahn project has been successfully achieved. An example in architecture is the *ACROS Fukuoka Building* in Fukuoka City, Japan, designed by Emilio Ambasz & Associates in 1995. Fourteen stories high, each story is smaller than the next, mimicking Noguchi's stepped concept. Unlike Noguchi's initial design for Play Mountain,



Isamu Noguchi, Buckminster Fuller,
and Ezra Pound in Spoleto, Italy,
1971. ©Robin Chandler Duke,
Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum.

Isamu Noguchi's Utopian Landscapes



52 *Discovery Frontier Playground*,
Grove Park Ohio, MSI Design
©2008 Paige Johnson.

Kodomo No Kuni Park
1966. Isamu Noguchi.
Tokyo, Japan. Public Domain.

ACROS Fukuoka utilizes extensive green space, with each step planted with trees and gardens. Green space helps to lower the temperature of an area 3°C in contrast to paved areas, reducing the urban heat island effect in which paved areas create an increase in overall temperature in the urban environment. Like *Play Mountain*, the building utilizes the pyramidal shape for double use of a given area.

Noguchi's ideas are also echoed in contemporary playground design. MSI Design created a solar-system themed playground, *Discovery Frontier*, in Grove City, Ohio in 2006. Its complex interrelatedness and repetitive circles recall Noguchi and Kahn's models for Riverside Park Playground. This futuristic adventure playground includes a moon structure comprised of a 36-foot diameter dome complete with crater tunnels, which lead to an 11-foot high covered playroom. The central feature is a 50-foot diameter sculpture comprised of five 14-foot structures made of steel, aluminum, and resin, reminiscent of the shade structures Noguchi designed in 1966 for *Kodomo No Kuni Park* near Tokyo, Japan.

Following images:
Amphitheater Riverside Playground.
1961 - 1962. Bronze. Isamu Noguchi.
©The Noguchi Museum, New York.
Riverside Playground.

1961 – 1962 Bronze Isamu Noguchi.
©The Noguchi Museum, New York.

Acros Fukuoka Building. Fukuoka
city, Japan. ©2009 Wikimedia
Commons.













PLAY OBJECTS

In 1939, Noguchi was commissioned to design play equipment for Hawaii's elaborate Ala Moana Park system. He created several models of Playground Equipment, including a climbing apparatus, a multiple-length swing set, and a spiral slide. These designs were sculptures that could be directly experienced with the body, touched and climbed upon. The Hawaii Parks Commissioner died before the project was completed, and it was never realized, though a version of *Playground Equipment* was built much later in Piedmont Park in Atlanta, Georgia.

Noguchi created a series of *Slide Mantras* in the late 1960s, inspired by the astronomical instruments built by the Maharajah Jai Singh II. He had taken photos of these instruments on his trip to India, and the name 'Mantra' refers to this origin. They are beautiful, elegant play objects that are monumental in size and impressive in concept. The slide mantras are intended to be interactive, to be touched and climbed. This is a form of art understood by children, and elevates the design of playgrounds and play objects to

something wonderful. *Black Slide Mantra* was built in 1990 in Odori Park in Sapporo City, Japan. *White Slide Mantra* is made of Carrara marble and was shown at the 1986 Venice Biennale. Noguchi was inspired to build the slide mantras while he was sliding down a stone incline at Machu Pichu in 1983. Noguchi describes the concept as, "the newest discovery turns out to be an even older myth."



UTOPIAN LANDSCAPES

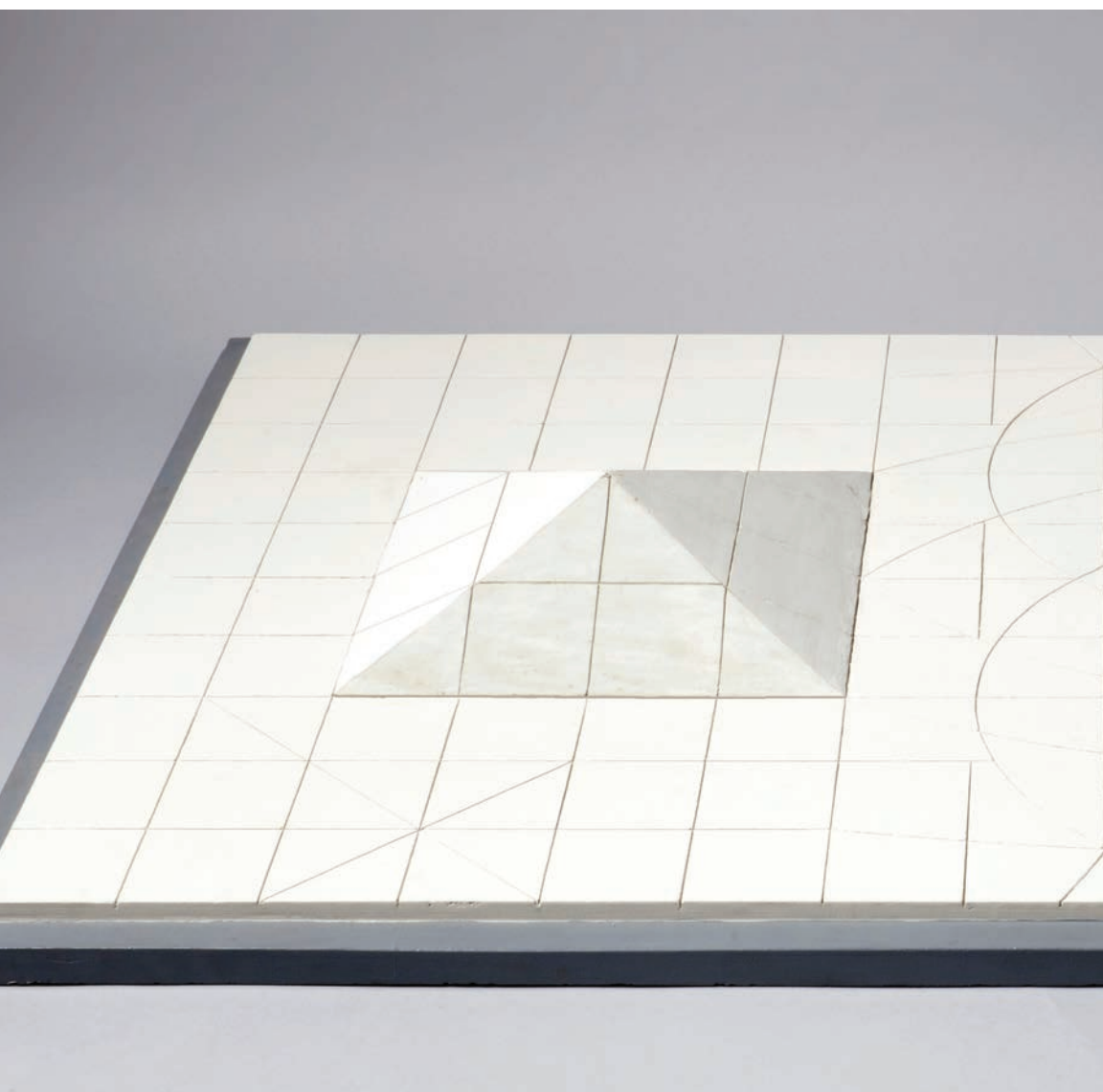
A vision of art and architecture in relationship with nature continued to occur in Noguchi's work. The artist felt that it was tremendously important for a community to have quality public spaces to provide both meaning and continuity. The 1960s were Noguchi's most productive period. His reputation as a designer of landscapes grew rapidly.

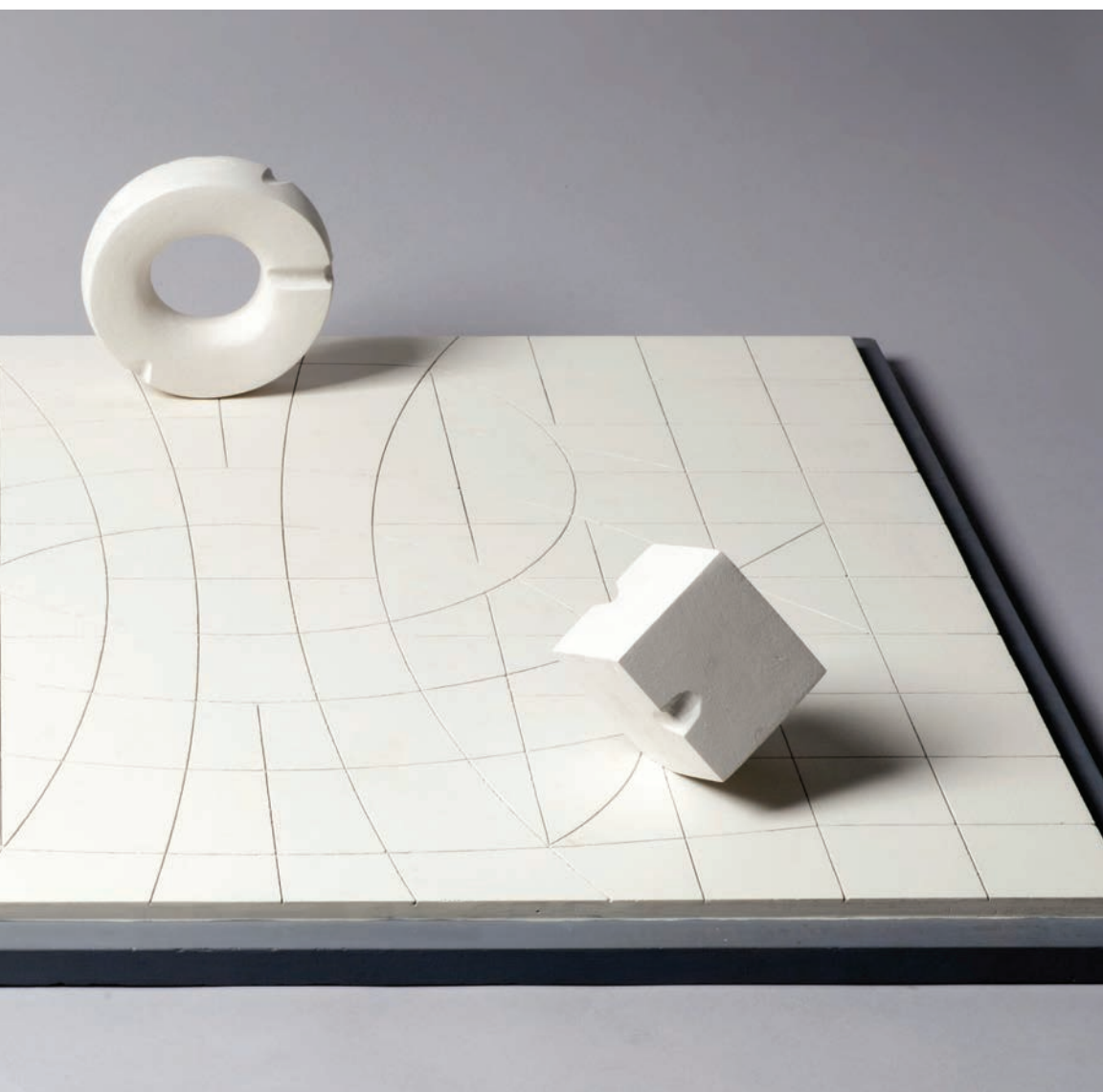
SUNKEN GARDEN FOR BEINECKE RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY

In 1963, Noguchi created a "garden" for Yale's Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. This work is not a garden in a traditional sense, rather an enclosed spatial environment, made of stone. The project utilized white marble, which originated in Vermont. Noguchi's knowledge of Italy and the astronomical observatories in India influenced the project. The clean, modern lines on the marble surface create a unique geometric perspective. The arrangement of the sculptural shapes comments upon man's relationship to the universe.

Following images:
*Model for Sunken Garden for
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript
Library.* 1963 Plaster, wood, paint.
Isamu Noguchi. ©The Noguchi
Museum, New York.

Isamu Noguchi working on the third
model for the Billy Rose Sculpture
Garden. ©The Noguchi Museum,
New York.









BILLY ROSE SCULPTURE GARDENS

Located at the National Museum in Jerusalem, Israel this large project held special meaning for Noguchi. Built between 1960 and 1965, the project included five curved retaining walls, 30 feet tall and over 100 feet long. Noguchi wanted to create what he called in his autobiography an "undulating and walkable landscape." He wished for the space to become a monument to the people who would visit it. He intended for the garden to be a destination that would bring hope.

...here there is consciousness of the earth upon which we stand. It is free, open—a place of release. The great walls do not limit possession. They are mounds within the general landscape from which they rise and to which they return. They are like the hills of Judea; like the wings of prayer touching the sky.

In 1961 Noguchi used the stones from a hill near the museum to construct the walls of the project. Some of the walls are 30 meters long. The garden covers five acres and its primary feature is a series of arching retaining walls. Israel came into existence in 1948. Noguchi felt that the country still lacked what he called "roots and identity" when he arrived there. He felt that it was integrally important for people to have quality public spaces where they lived and that these spaces created meaning and continuity for a people.

SUNKEN GARDEN, MANHATTAN

The garden for the *Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza*, 1965-1966, or *Sunken Garden* is one of Noguchi's most accessible







landscape works. It was created in collaboration with designer and architect Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. Located outside Chase's Manhattan headquarters, the piece is a water fountain, located in a circular well surrounded by a wide-open plaza. Left dry in winter, in summer it is flooded with water that cascades over the rim of the circular basin. Water shoots upwards from fountain at changing intervals, sending ripples over the basin's surface. The geometric pattern of the tiled ground was meant to contrast with the natural forms of the rocks. Noguchi wanted this surface to be "like the wild and surging shell of the sea, and . . . floating on it would be the elemental rocks."

ISAMU NOGUCHI GARDEN MUSEUM

In 1975, Noguchi established a studio in Long Island City in Queens, New York, which became his working studio and living quarters. Later to become the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, the garden is an example of the artist's work in which he made no compromises. A cement path curves gently through the base of the garden, which is comprised of soft gray stone. Intentionally placed trees interrupt the stone, as well as a number of Noguchi's sculptures. Each piece relates to the other, standing solemnly apart, but intimately related.

In this garden is *The Well*, one of Noguchi's ground-breaking sculptures. A piece of deep brown rock is carved flat at the top, in its center a circle is cut, filled perpetually with water by an internal pump. The well overflows gently and the water glides first uniformly and then broken over the sides of the stone. It is an expression of perfection and harmony, reflecting the random wonders found in nature.

74 The Well, Isamu Noguchi (1982).
Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum.
Long Island City, New York. ©2011
Diana Witcher.

Following image:
Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum,
Isamu Noguchi. Long Island City,
New York. ©2011 Diana Witcher.







PHILIP A. HART PLAZA

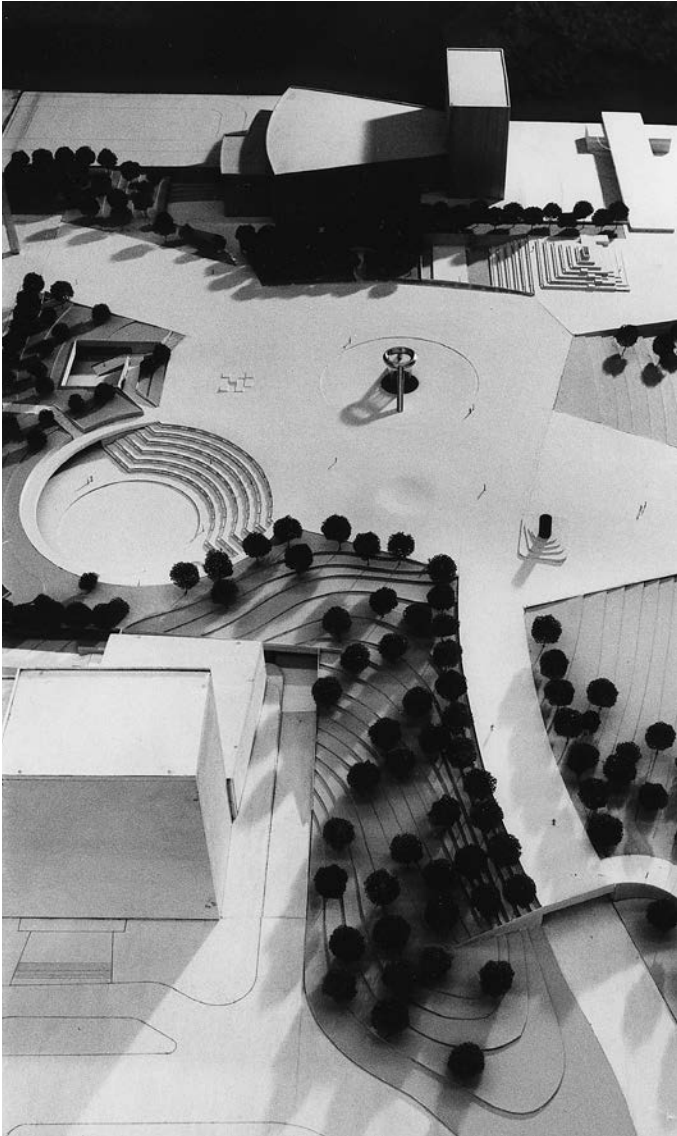
In 1973, the sculptor claimed that the *Philip A. Hart Plaza* in Detroit was the design that came closest to expressing his first ideas for playgrounds. Anna Thompson Dodge left \$2,000,000 to the City of Detroit for the construction of the *Horace E. Dodge and Son Memorial Fountain*. Two years from the deadline for use of the funds, the foundation asked Noguchi to quickly make a plan. He insisted that he design the entire site, including a park and gardens. He invented a nozzle for the fountain, ten inches in diameter, which allowed the water to exit in a C shape. When the fountain was at full capacity it ran at eight hundred horsepower, programmed with thirty-one different variations. The plan was for a park that included a 125 foot tower, and an amphitheater that is designed for skating. This project fulfilled Noguchi's desire to make large scale sculptural works in a truly public forum. The plaza is open to the public and is a major destination in the city of Detroit.



78 *Horace E. Dodge and Son Memorial Fountain*. Detroit, Michigan. 1972-1979.
©Flickr Creative Commons.

Philip H. Hart Plaza, Basswood Model. Detroit, Michigan. 1972 – 1979. Isamu Noguchi.
©The Noguchi Museum, New York.

A Study in Time and Space



CALIFORNIA SCENARIO

A uniquely diverse sculpture garden that covers 1.6 acres, *California Scenario* is located in Costa Mesa, California. Completed in 1982, the project conceptually represents the natural resources of California. Noguchi designed areas for indigenous plantings, including cacti and redwoods, while a central water feature divides the surface. Commissioned by developer Henry Segerstrom, the client asked for a garden to be built on the site that was once a family lima bean farm. Different areas of the garden are titled conceptually, including *Land Use*, *The Desert Land*, *The Forest Walk*, *Energy Fountain*, *Water Use*, and *Water Source*.

MOERE-NUMA KOEN

Late in his career, Isamu Noguchi integrated his varied experiences in landscape design, creating a monumental park ,*Moerenuma Kōen* (モエレ沼公園) (1988), located in Hokkaido, Japan. The artist passed away just after presenting the final design. The project was completed in 2005, based upon his conceptual model, six years after his death. The park's playground includes a wide array of Noguchi's *Play Equipment*. *Mount Moere*, a massive pyramidal homage to *Play Mountain* dominates the vista of the park. The large-stepped pyramidal hill serves as a place to view the countryside but does not function as an urban earth-sheltered building. *Moere-numa Koen* is a final monument to Noguchi and his essential landscape works.



California Scenario. 1982.
Costa Mesa, California. Isamu
Noguchi. ©2007 Rob Corder.
Flickr Creative Commons.

*Play Equipment, Moerenuma
Park*. 1988. Hokkaido, Japan.
Isamu Noguchi. ©2011 Ame Otoko.
Flickr Creative Commons.





CONCLUSION

Isamu Noguchi's career resulted in work of impressive diversity. His playgrounds, landscapes, and gardens are products of his most enduring passion. These large-scale works stretch the limits of what is considered art and functional object. Study of his work reveals his tenacity, creativity, and unwillingness to compromise his artistic ideals. These qualities resulted in groundbreaking landscapes that arose from a desire to sculpt the world, to create it, as he would like it to be. His work reveals both a childlike wonder and the maturity of an artist willing to push the limits of his field.

Noguchi was a resolute modernist, but returned always to nature for inspiration. The quality and availability of public space pragmatically affects our daily lives. Exploring his landscape designs may challenge both artists and the larger community to question the nature and definition of art and its relationship to design. Isamu Noguchi showed us a new way to understand art. His work breaks free of a stagnant aesthetic, bringing a fresh viewpoint to the ancient and profound.

Designers and artists that integrate literary, cultural, and social issues into their work achieve a new measure of success. Noguchi modeled a willingness to imagine something new, a willingness to take on monumental projects, and finally a desire to create designs with the power to transform society. Noguchi listened to the inner voice that told him to return to his roots, to work hard, to persevere always with an open mind, and ultimately to not accept traditional boundaries. Indeed, Noguchi's true triumph and contribution is that art and design are in fact one discipline, that those labels are essentially limiting, and that art and design are something larger than we imagine. His work is a call to action. Artists and designers must move forward to create something that is fresh, and meaningful and then do the work to tangibly communicate that contribution to the world.







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