

Isamu Noguchi's Utopian Landscapes: The Sculpture of Playgrounds and Gardens

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Abstract

This paper tells the story of Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi and highlights his lesser-known landscape works. Noguchi was an artist of profound integrity and insight. His landscapes include playgrounds, monuments, and Japanese-inspired gardens. He chose landscapes as a medium for their inherent social value and as an artistic contribution to society. He was interested in the use and function of sculpture and wanted sculpture to encompass a larger vision and communicate on a grander scale. Moving beyond the limiting tradition of sculpture for the sole purpose of aesthetic, his was a sculpture for the common man. Noguchi was inspired by his childhood in Japan, by the high modernist movement, and by his involvement in the New York School of abstract artists that became prominent in the 1930s. Examination of Noguchi's work allows artists and the larger community 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. *Keywords: Isamu Noguchi, sculpture, landscape architecture, playgrounds, modern art, design*

Artist and designer Isamu Noguchi was one of the best-known American sculptors during the 1960s and perhaps the first visual artist to sculpt public space. He had no training in landscape architecture, but used his intuitive and artistic understanding of space to create landscapes that he considered large sculptures. Interestingly, Noguchi called all his designs sculpture, creating significant works that encompassed academic and abstract sculpture, product design, set design, playground design, and landscape architecture. His work was innovative and traditionally

inspired, combining his background in academic sculpture, a unique modern aesthetic, and the influence of his Japanese-American heritage.

Noguchi advocated for sculpture to be a larger and more universal discipline, wanting to create art that was relevant to everyday people. These goals led him away from academic sculpture to conceive of monumental landscape projects. Noguchi's lesser-known works include monuments, playgrounds, and gardens. Many of his designs are unrealized, expressed in models for projects that were never built; yet, the concepts are groundbreaking and visually stunning. Noguchi's landscapes are a profound contribution to art and design. Informed by a lifelong inquiry into form and its relationship to function, these large-scale works stretch the limits of what is considered art and functional object. Noguchi pioneered a concept that is still controversial. 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. Noguchi's work 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. Noguchi wanted a new art that was free of what he called the "limiting categories of architects, painters, sculptors and landscapists" (Larivee, 2011 p. 56). 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.

Born on November 17, 1904 in Los Angeles, California, Isamu Noguchi moved to Japan with his American mother to join his Japanese father when he was two years old (Hunter, 1978). He 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 from an early age. Noguchi created and cared for a garden in his childhood. 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: "I came to know a playground, or open space, that filled me with foreboding" (Noguchi, 1967, p.12). Noguchi's childhood experiences, as well as those of his youth lead him to seek to fundamentally change his natural surroundings through his work.

As a young artist, living in New York City, Noguchi worked extensively on formal small-scale sculptures, often portrait heads, but was ultimately dissatisfied with making decorative objects for the elite. He found the work limiting and disapproved of its reliance upon vanity, its focus upon the individual. He wished for his sculpture to communicate more meaningfully to others and to function on a grander scale (Noguchi, 1967). This impulse turned his attention to a passion for the design of public spaces: landscapes, playgrounds, and monumental sculpture.

Noguchi was influenced by the modernist idealism of his friend inventor Buckminster Fuller, architect Louis Kahn, and seminal modernist architect Le Corbusier. He combined this contemporary aesthetic with influence gained in his childhood in Japan, incorporating the traditional simplicity of Japanese gardens and temples. He was a friend of the abstract painters Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning, as well as other members of the New York School of prominent abstract artists. This aesthetic informed his sculpture, as well as that of his mentor, influential sculptor Constantin Brancusi, with whom he briefly apprenticed in Paris (Noguchi, 1967).

Noguchi's career shows that the design of public space is inherently political and reveals the designer's aspirations and beliefs about the world, which are expressed through the aesthetic and functional aspects of each design. Noguchi saw landscape design as a way to merge art and function in a way that was truly democratic. Qualities of universality and neutrality are often desired in the design of public spaces, but these choices in themselves are impactful and ultimately political (Harrison, 2003). The character of a public space, traditional or contemporary, economical or opulent, communicates visually and functionally to the user (Lawson, 2001). Landscape design conveys the values of a community and ultimately impacts whether individuals are welcomed or excluded from a space. Designed spaces

can profoundly affect individuals, communities, and society at large.

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 (Noguchi, 1967).

Noguchi's early landscape designs began as several conceptual models. These generalized, rectangular reliefs include the designs for *Monument to the Plough and Play Mountain* and served as expressions of ideas that he developed in his later works (Noguchi, 1967). With an expansive vision, Noguchi saw the earth as a medium. Many of his projects included earth modulations, as he sought to literally sculpt the earth. *Monument to the Plow* was Noguchi's first large scale landscape design. Dedicated both to Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson who together invented the American plow, the plan called for a monumental earthwork, a shallow pyramid one mile across. One side of the pyramid would be tilled earth, one side would be left fallow, and one would be planted with seasonal crops. At the apex was a massive sculptural steel plow (Noguchi & Kahn, 1997). The design reflected Noguchi's vision of the American dream: agricultural land and traditional work ethic supporting technological innovation. 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 (Noguchi & Kahn, 1997).

Monument to the Plow was conceived alongside several other landscape projects, including Noguchi's first playground designs. The artist saw playground design as a chance to create a democratic, utopian, public space. 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 (Kozlovsky, 2007). 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. (Noguchi, 1967, pp. 176-177)

Noguchi saw the concept of “play” as a metaphor for freedom and sought to engage the observer’s free will by providing a space for unlimited imagination (Noguchi, 1967).

Isamu Noguchi’s lifelong interest in playgrounds grew from the precursor of his later playground designs, the 1933 *Play Mountain* (Figure 1). He claimed that the work was ‘purely instinctive’, not based on drawings or extensive preliminary work (Noguchi & Kahn, 1997, p. 132). This intuitive inspiration was a hallmark of Noguchi’s work, as was his determination to artistically express his unique and forward-thinking ideas.

Figure 1



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 (Noguchi, 1967). 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. Noguchi dove headlong into a medium that was yet uncharted for visual artists (Larivee, 2011). Work for the commons, for the 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" (Noguchi, 1967, pp. 21-22). The innovative plan was soundly rejected, but Noguchi's interest in playgrounds continued.

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 (Noguchi, 1997). The Hawaii Parks Commissioner died before the project was completed, and it was never realized (Noguchi, 1967), though a version of *Playground Equipment* was built much later in Piedmont Park in Atlanta, Georgia (Noguchi, 1997).

Noguchi presented his designs for *Playground Equipment* to the New York City Parks Department, but officials rejected the plans due to safety concerns. In response, he created *Contoured Playground* in 1941. Again, the playground was to be one large play object; this time composed entirely of rounded land modulations. Slides, shelters, areas for games, and water features were built into the contours of the park. Studies have shown that the design of spaces affects how children functionally utilize their environment. Children prefer to play in environments that are not enclosed and allow for unstructured

play. Environments that limit activities are of interest for a limited time. Children actually prefer play spaces that incorporate an element of danger (Cele, 2005). *Contoured Playground* was unique compared to playgrounds today; in 1941, it was truly revolutionary. New York Parks officials seemed open to the plan, and there was a possibility of locating it in Central Park. The onset of World War II interrupted the project, and it was never realized (Noguchi, 1967).

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 find a purpose for sculpture that was beyond the aesthetic. He observed that sculpture has been used ceremonially throughout history through effigies, monuments, temple plazas, and dance halls. He wanted to discover how sculpture fit into a utopian world in which people had the time to view and appreciate art (Noguchi, 1967).

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 (Cummings, 1973). Noguchi wanted to observe, in situ, the origins of use of sculpture. He visited prehistoric sites in England, including Stonehenge and ancient caves in Aylesbury. He went to Paris and Brittany to observe pre-historic caves, as well as the mysterious dolmens (portal graves). These sites illustrated 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 (Noguchi, 1967; Cummings, 1973).

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 (Noguchi, 1967). He believed that inspiration for successful art must come directly from nature (Cummings, 1973). Thus, perhaps his most compelling realized works are interactive gardens, complex natural spaces populated with sculptural objects.

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 (Lawson, 2001). Noguchi's landscape works created functional spaces that invited the viewer to conceptually engage the ultimate questions of time, space, and human existence.

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. (Noguchi, 1967, p. 160)

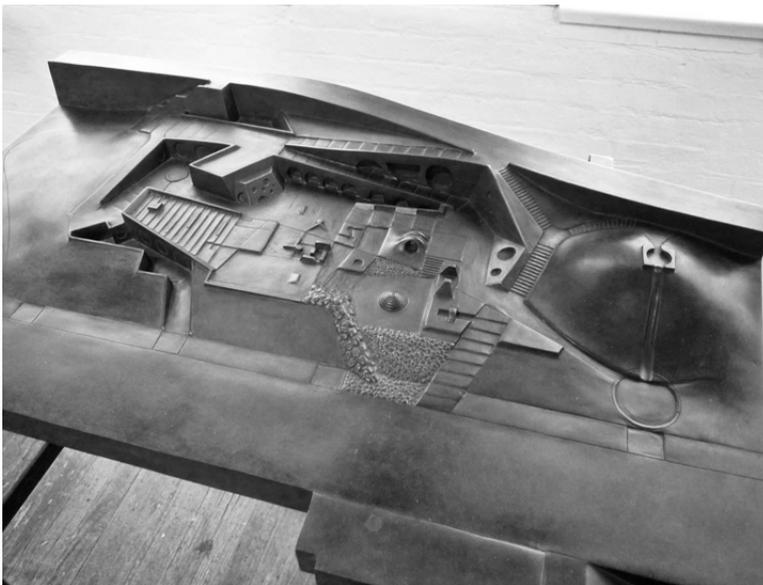
This awareness of the observer and the larger forces at work in a given space lends Noguchi's landscapes a unique power.

Noguchi's designs communicated traditional spiritual ideals of the East through the lens of modernist idealism. While Noguchi was a skeptic, his knowledge of Zen Buddhism profoundly influenced his work (Ashton, 1992). The concept of the void, an idea discussed in Zen Buddhism, was a repeated theme in Noguchi's work. 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" (Yoshiko Seo, 2007, pp. 3-4). 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” (Lawson, 2001, p. 201). 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.

In 1956, Noguchi designed a garden for the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. Intriguingly, Noguchi described the work as an “ambulatory garden” and said that human movement activated his sculptures as one moved through the space. The observer was meant to contemplate the “relative value of all things” (Noguchi, 1967, p. 165). The UNESCO garden included the traditional features of a Japanese garden: stepping-stones, cherry trees, a vaulted bridge, and meticulously placed stones (Noguchi, 1997).

Figure 2



Noguchi's most outstanding landscape work was comprised of the unrealized plans for *Riverside Drive Park* (Figure 2). Since he had past difficulty realizing projects in New York City, Noguchi decided to enlist the help of an architect and invited Louis Kahn to

collaborate (Noguchi & Kahn, 1997). Noguchi and Kahn were at the height of their respective careers, and there was renewed public interest in innovations in playground design (Larivee, 2011). They worked for five years on multiple proposals for the project, and 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’” (Noguchi & Kahn, 1997, p. 100).

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 (Johnson, 2008). High modernism sought to improve the infrastructure of cities by creating 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 structures, to start fresh, from a blank canvas (Johnson, 2008). 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 the citizens of Paris (Johnson, 2008). Noguchi and Kahn’s plan for *Riverside Drive* encountered similar problems integrating with the local community.

While the initial plan for the *Riverside Drive* playground 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 (Noguchi, 1997). If the original plans had gone forward, a traditional grass park, shaded by trees would have made way for a monolith of modernist stonework (Noguchi, 1997). A revised plan was submitted to the Parks Department in June of 1962. The central structure was again a massive earthwork, a stepped pyramidal building. Designed to be a suntrap, providing warmth in winter, the roof functioned both

as an above ground play area and a shelter for facilities below. Play objects would be made of colored concrete and built into the landscape (Noguchi, 1967; Noguchi & Kahn, 1997). This plan was also rejected. The project was thought to be too costly, too large in scale, and markedly avant-gardist (Noguchi & Kahn, 1997). 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 (Larivee, 2011). As the modified plans became less grand in scope, Noguchi became less satisfied; he felt it no longer reflected his vision (Noguchi, 1967). 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. (Noguchi, 1967, p. 177)

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. The *Adele Rosenwald Levy Memorial 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* (Figure 3) 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*, *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 (Goto & Gotoh, 2002). 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. The design's 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 (Stretch, 2010), reminiscent of the shade structures Noguchi designed for *Kodomo No Kuni Park* near Tokyo, Japan.

Figure 3



Noguchi's vision of art and architecture in relationship with nature continued to occur in his work. The artist felt that it was tremendously important for a community to have quality public spaces to provide both meaning and continuity (Noguchi 1976). The garden

for the Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza, 1965-1966, or *Sunken Garden* (Figure 4) in New York City 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 (Ashton, 1992). 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 the basin 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 water'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" (Noguchi, 1967, p. 171).

Figure 4



In 1975, Noguchi established a studio in Long Island City in Queens, New York, which became his working studio with living quarters (Ashton, 1992). Later to become the *Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum* (Figure 5), the garden is an example of Noguchi'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. One can feel a sense of place in Noguchi's garden. Each piece relates to the other, standing solemnly apart, but intimately related.

Figure 5



In this garden is *The Well* (Figure 6), one of Noguchi's groundbreaking 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.

Later in his career, Noguchi integrated his varied experiences in landscape design, imagining that playgrounds could also be gardens. The artist's interest in playgrounds persisted, and during the last years of his life, he designed a park, *Moere-numa Koen* (Figure 7), in Hokkaido, Japan based upon *Play Mountain* (Noguchi & Kahn, 1997).

Isamu Noguchi died just after presenting the final design. The project was completed, based upon his conceptual model, six years after his death. The park's playground includes a wide array of

Noguchi's *Play Equipment*. 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 (Larivee, 2011). *Moere-numa Koen* is a final monument to Noguchi and his essential landscape works.

Figure 6



Figure 7

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 Noguchi's landscape designs may challenge both artists and the larger community to question the nature and definition of art and its relationship to 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.

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, new, and meaningful and then do the work to functionally communicate that contribution to the world.

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