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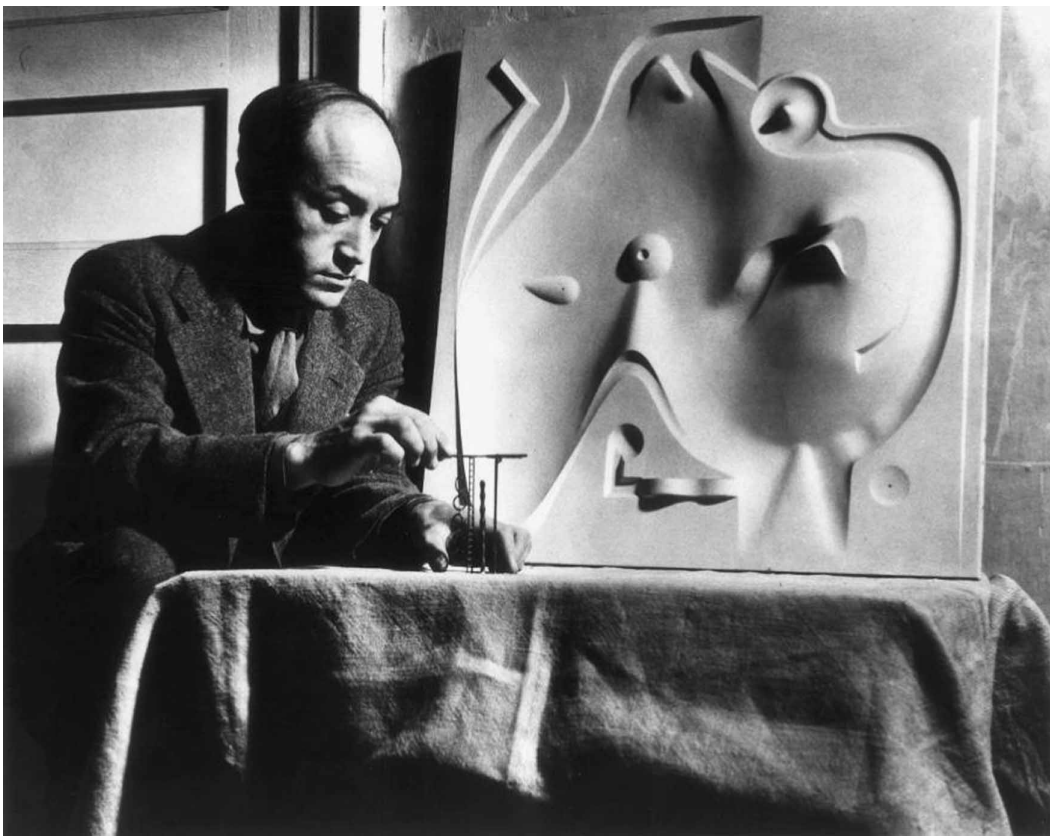
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PLAYSCAPES: ISAMU NOGUCHI'S DESIGNS FOR PLAY

Shaina D. Larrivee



Frontispiece

Isamu Noguchi with models for *Playground Equipment for Ala Moana Park* and *Contoured Playground*. c.1940s. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

The sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) first began to explore how art could shape and mold an urban landscape in the early 1930s. In 1934, with one project in hand, he made use of a social connection to meet with New York City Parks Commissioner Robert Moses. Noguchi brought with him an unusual plaster sculpture, measuring about 25 inches square, featuring a low pyramid with a central concave area, ridged side, and a curved edge. *Play Mountain* (1933; Figure 1) was an informal model for an equipment-less playground to be constructed entirely out of shaped earth. As proposed, the realized playground would take up one city block, including earth piled to form a central pyramid and shelter with steps along one side, carved slopes to form a built-in slide and accommodate sledding, a swimming pool, and a band shell with the steps doubling as seating. With no added equipment, children's exercise would be derived by running, jumping, and climbing in and around the massive sculptured earth form.

Noguchi approached Moses in 1934 with *Play Mountain* hoping to realize his concept in New York City. Theoretically, his timing was excellent; 1934 was the same year that Moses was appointed New York City Parks Commissioner, a new, powerful position uniting the previously divided parks offices of the City's five boroughs. Moses would hold the title for 26 years, often in conjunction with one of the dozen other titles he held over his five decades of public service. He would earn unprecedented notoriety for his influence over the City's planning and structure, and in 1934 this reputation was well underway. When Noguchi met with Moses, he

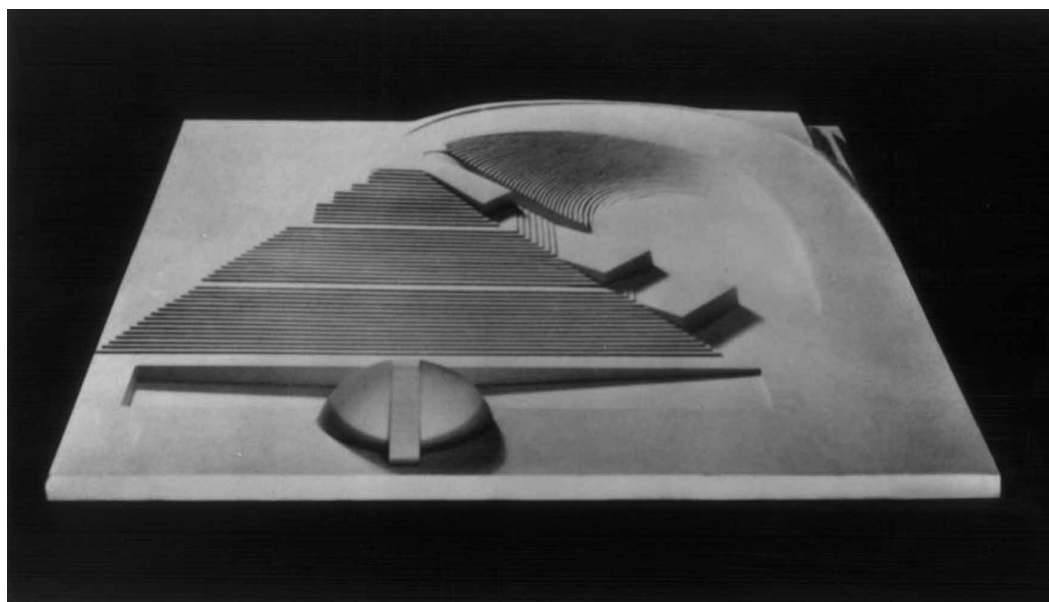


Figure 1. Isamu Noguchi. Model for *Play Mountain*. 1933. Plaster. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

also was probably aware of the Commissioner's well-publicized first priority: to dramatically increase the number of playgrounds throughout the city. Beginning that same year and continuing through the late 1950s, Moses would open over 400 playgrounds by reassigning parkland, acquiring new land, and coordinating with the City's schools.¹ For Noguchi, as a young sculptor with no background in architecture or landscape design, approaching Moses was his best opportunity to see his concept realized.

At the time, *Play Mountain* would have undoubtedly appeared radically experimental in its approach to children's recreation. The design asserted, with no apparent precedent, that children's exercise and entertainment could be stimulated by simply providing earth modulations and steps for running, jumping, and sliding. Noguchi's playground was a spectacular innovation of design, and something never before seen in New York City's brief 32-year history of building and operating playgrounds.² Yet these singular qualities made Noguchi's model fundamentally incompatible with Moses' ambitious agenda. Any progressive sentiment Moses' policies expressed was not to be found in experimentation, but in the standardization of previously established norms. The hallmark of Moses-era playgrounds was regularized design and mass-produced equipment based on turn-of-the-century Reform Era standards. Eventually, new ideas of health, safety, and creative play would garner critics of Moses' methods, but in 1934 the Commissioner was drawing citywide praise for new playgrounds such as Sara Delano Roosevelt Park, which opened that September in Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Noguchi later recalled that *Play Mountain* was dismissed with sarcasm.³ This rejection and a series of other experiences caused Noguchi to speak bitterly of Moses throughout his life, and to prefer working with architects rather than directly with city officials. But in retrospect, Noguchi's expectation that Moses would be receptive to such a proposal seems unimaginably misguided for a number of reasons. First and foremost, in 1934 municipal playgrounds were the domain of urban planners and landscape architects. New York City had never engaged an artist to "sculpt" parkland. Second, playgrounds, a relatively new priority for New York and other urban areas, were decades away from a renaissance that would embrace experimentation and promote "creative play." And third, amongst Noguchi's peers, sculptors largely focused on discrete aesthetic objects; the practice of artists interacting on a large scale with the earth would not emerge in any significant way until the land art movements of the late 1960s. In 1934 there was no precedent to suggest that such an ambitious vision for public land would be welcomed by a city official. However, Noguchi was never one to limit himself to what was standard practice for artists of his day; his work has ranged from sculpture to industrial design, to stage sets, to landscape architecture. His contributions to public space vary from discrete sculpture such as *Red Cube*

(1968) in lower Manhattan, to full urban plazas, such as the eight-acre *Philip A. Hart Plaza* in Detroit (1972–1979).⁴ Noguchi's playground designs, beginning with *Play Mountain*, are part of this legacy.

Later in life, at a time when Noguchi had designed six playgrounds yet seen only one realized, he commented that despite his larger success with public projects, his “best works,” the playgrounds, had never been built.⁵ As with *Play Mountain*, the impediments to Noguchi's realization of his playground designs were a result of the times. The procedural path for artists wishing to address public space with site-specific, environmental, or utilitarian works, such as playgrounds, was ill defined during the modern movement of public art and prior. It is only within the past few decades that artists have been afforded significant opportunities to affect the design and function of civic space beyond the placement of monumental sculpture in public plazas. Noguchi's interest in playground design initially developed in conjunction with a broader philosophy of art. The modern utopian ideals of Noguchi's peers, such as architect/inventor R. Buckminster Fuller, had a strong influence on Noguchi's sculptural practice.⁶ He urged for a “reintegration of the arts towards some purposeful and social end” to “enlarge the present outlet permitted by our limiting categories of architects, painters, sculptors and landscapists.”⁷ *Play Mountain* was one of the earliest reflections of Noguchi's desire to bring fine art into the context of everyday living. His lifelong involvement in the design of playgrounds and “play sculpture” stemmed from this ideology and belief in the educational potential of sculptured forms for physical use by children. Though largely unrealized, Noguchi valued his playground designs highly amongst his diverse body of work, and described *Play Mountain* as “the kernel out of which have grown all my ideas relating sculpture to the earth.”⁸

By 1939, Noguchi had had some of his first successes in public projects, including his political mural in high relief in Mexico City, *History Mexico* (1936), and a recently awarded commission for the *Associated Press Building Plaque* in Rockefeller Center (installed 1940). Bolstered by such achievements, Noguchi returned to his interest in playground design. While arranging an exhibition at the Honolulu Academy of Arts in Hawaii, Noguchi offered to design a playground for the City's Ala Moana Park. Honolulu Parks Commissioner, Lester McCoy, was interested enough that Noguchi began his design upon his return to New York. *Playground Equipment for Ala Moana Park* (1939; Figure 2) is a set of sculpturally informed models of a slide, swing set, climbing equipment, and seesaw. A shift from sculpted earth to standard play equipment, the project brought Noguchi's work closer to what was typical of playgrounds of the time. When the project in Hawaii failed to be realized, Noguchi returned to the New York City Parks Department with his completed models, only to be informed that the main concern of the city was safety and any untested equipment had the

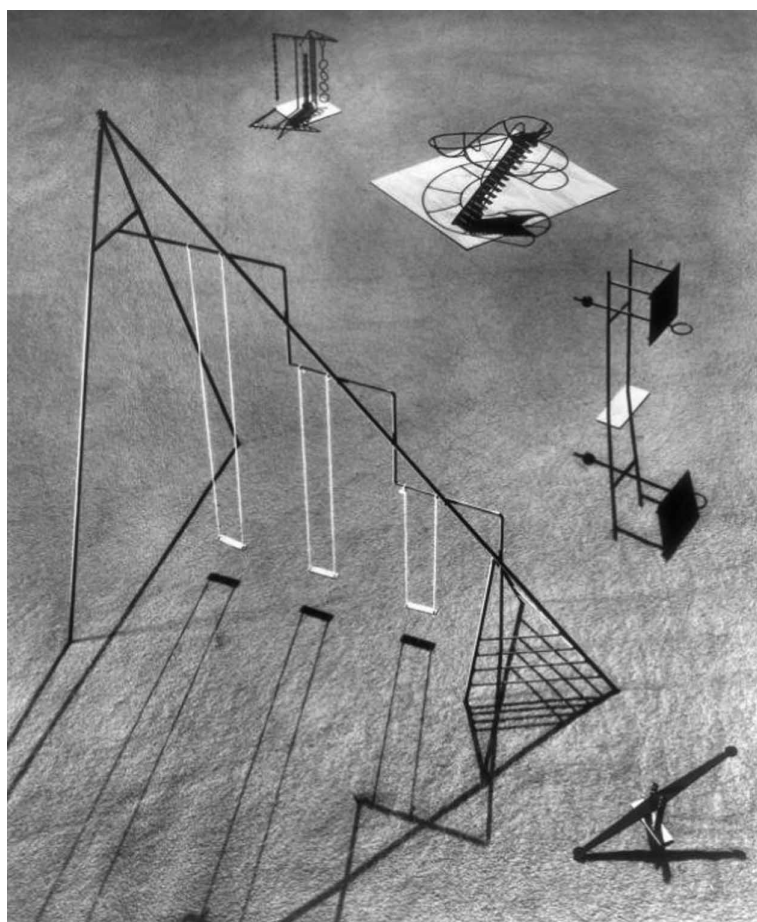


Figure 2. Isamu Noguchi. Models for *Playground Equipment for Ala Moana Park*. 1939. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

potential to be dangerous. Yet rather than accepting the Department's judgment, Noguchi became more determined to showcase the value of his ideas for play. He commented that he "felt obliged to answer all the dire warning of the danger to which I would expose small children with my play equipment," and returned to the Robert Moses offices for a third time in early 1941 with *Contoured Playground* (1941; Figure 3), anticipating that the surface of this latest design would prove accident-proof.⁹ Made entirely of low-pitched earth modulations, the design proposed a molded surface with regular earth mounds and hollows. As with *Play Mountain*, *Contoured Playground* would be devoid of equipment. Instead, the ground itself would serve for sliding, crawling, and exploring, with the added feature of water sprays in the summer months. Whether due to Noguchi's dogged persistence, or shifting interests in the Parks Department, it appears that *Contoured Playground* was briefly given at least polite consideration; at one point



Figure 3. Isamu Noguchi. Model for *Contoured Playground*. 1941. Bronze cast from plaster original. Photo: Kevin Nobel. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

a suggestion was made that the design could potentially fit in Central Park.¹⁰ But no actual plans were formed, and Noguchi was left to inquire about the possible realization of his idea into 1947.¹¹ It is most likely that the project was abandoned by December 1941 when the entry of the United States into World War II stalled public construction across the country. The New York City Parks Department did not resume its construction program until the late 1940s.

In 1946, curator Dorothy C. Miller included Noguchi in the exhibition *Fourteen Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Hung vertically on the wall alongside new, abstract sculpture was the plaster model for *Contoured Playground*, signaling the work's relevance to Noguchi's sculptural practice. His early interactions with the New York City Parks Department can be examined within this context. When Noguchi approached the Parks Department with his playgrounds, he was requesting that the Department step outside its standard mode of operation and accept nothing less than an experiment in modern art. But the New York City Parks Department was not fielding experimental designs for civic spaces from modernist sculptors. It would be nearly three decades before the Parks Department would have any significant program of engaging artists within the City's public parks.¹² Organizations sponsoring public art would not have been

interested in Noguchi's playgrounds either. From *Play Mountain* (1934) to *Contoured Playground* (1941), the Public Works of Art Project (1933–1934) and the larger Works Progress Administration (WPA) program (1935–1942) were the primary paths for artists to receive commissions and funding for public art projects. Although Noguchi was surrounded by contemporaries who were receiving WPA funding, he was turned down from the program on more than one occasion: once with the reasoning that the income he earned by sculpting portraits made him ineligible for government funding; another time when he boldly proposed an earth-form sculpture covering the ground in front of Newark Airport, to be viewed only from the sky. The first experience was a bureaucratic decision that he suspected was based on personal issues, the second was more indicative of the WPA's program.¹³ The dominant public art style then was regionalism typified by murals and civic sculpture. The WPA would not assist an artist wishing to build a playground.

The field of playground design was also too young and too standardized at the time to be receptive to Noguchi's artistic interpretations of form and function. To a large extent, the type of playground championed by Robert Moses in New York City during his tenure was typical of playgrounds across America both up to and beyond 1950.¹⁴ Characterized by the "S-es," – swings, slides, sandboxes, seesaws and spray showers – these varied little from the playgrounds built at the start of the nation's playground movement at the turn of the twentieth century. In the later 1930s and '40s, new discussions on the design and function of playgrounds were emerging in architecture journals, primarily championed by landscape architects.¹⁵ In the U.S., Noguchi was the only artist actively engaged in the minimal dialogue on the design of playgrounds. Notably, his *Play Equipment* was featured in *Architectural Forum* in 1940.¹⁶ But while the emergent discussion went generally unheard throughout the 1940s, this would begin to change after the popular success of Noguchi's next playground proposal in the early 1950s.

Noguchi was by no means well known for his playground designs by the late 1940s, but some press coverage and exhibitions would have alerted at least the arts community to his interests. *Play Mountain* was included in Noguchi's well-received 1935 exhibition at Marie Harriman Gallery in New York. *Fourteen Americans* with *Contoured Playground* in 1946 had also drawn praise. And, oddly, seven years after the publication of *Play Equipment* in *Architectural Forum*, the distinctive shapes of Noguchi's slide and swings appeared in the Rita Hayworth movie, *Down to Earth* (1947), in a surrealistic end scene. Noguchi sued Columbia Pictures for infringement of intellectual property, and gained some attention for all the controversy.¹⁷ It would not have been wholly surprising, then, when Audrey Hess, wife of *ARTNews* editor Thomas B. Hess, approached Noguchi with a commission for a playground design in 1950. Audrey Hess was the scion of a family of philanthropists who dedicated her time to fundraising for the arts and

children's charities. She was also a parent and a resident of Beekman Place at 50th Street, two blocks north of the ongoing United Nations Headquarters construction. When it was announced that the U.N. would set aside one acre of land on their city-donated property for the development of a community playground, Hess jumped at the chance to influence the design. She reached out to Noguchi based on his "original conceptions."¹⁸

Hess was interested in a playground that could foster imagination through beauty and good design, reasoning that "a playground meeting these objectives is befitting the U.N. and the forward looking standards which it sets" and would therefore "signalize [sic] to children what the U.N. stands for."¹⁹ Her progressive aspirations found a match in Noguchi's singular approach to playground design. His resulting *United Nations Playground* model (1951; Figure 4) combined aspects of his past three playgrounds, while greatly expanding previous notions of

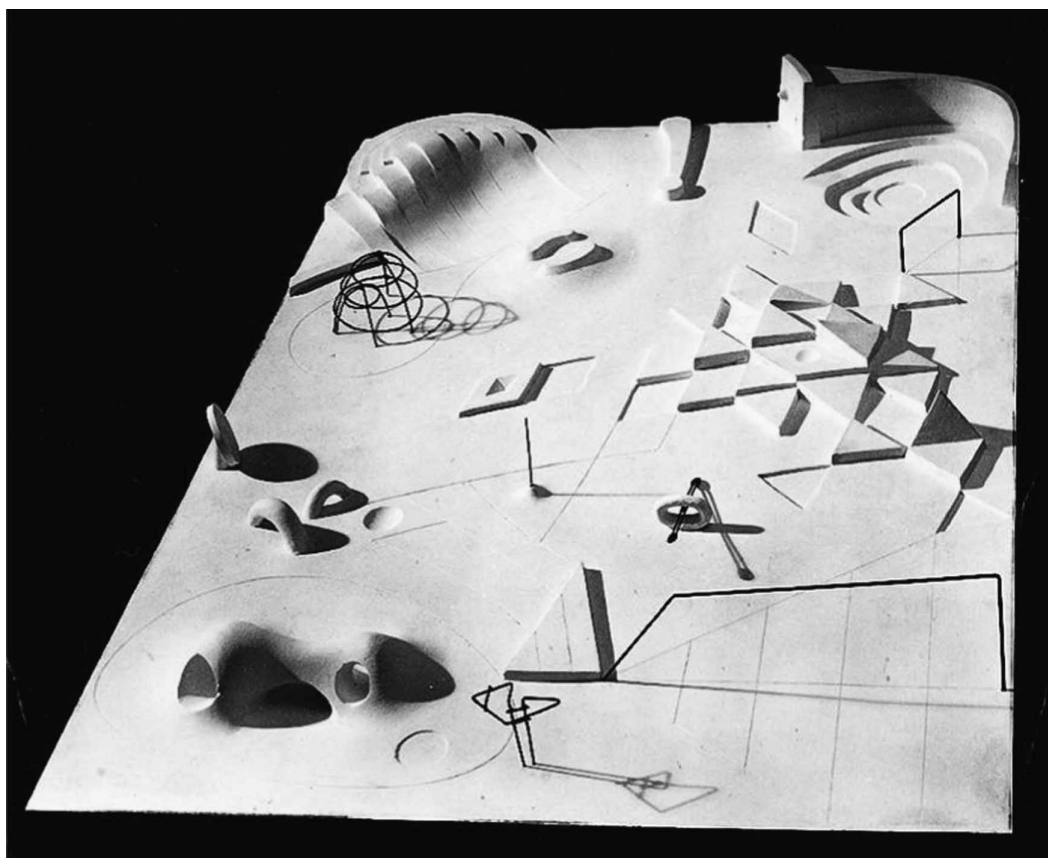


Figure 4. Isamu Noguchi. Model for *United Nations Playground*. 1952. Plaster. Photo: Charles Uht. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. Top left corner includes built in slide; center-right includes triangular "step pyramid"; just below that is a see-saw set in a large, tubular circle.

built-in earth modulations and suggesting new forms of “equipment.” The ground itself would provide shapes and areas for play, more specific to function this time than in *Contoured Playground*. Two hills would be hollowed out as areas for climbing and a wider mound cut with ridges for steps and slides. A “step pyramid,” tentatively brightly colored, would provide exercise from jumping and climbing. The plaster model also included wire maquettes, which are reminiscent of jungle gyms, and suggest frames for swings, and forms meant for free climbing and crawling to foster imaginative development.

Theoretically, creating a playground for private land could have been easier than designing one for city property. Hess was prepared to raise money to cover the cost of construction, in effect donating the playground to the U.N. Additionally, circumventing the authority of the New York City Parks Department would mean not having to conform to Robert Moses’ established protocol for the design of city playgrounds. In fact, while campaigning for support of the project, Hess, undoubtedly aware of Noguchi’s past experiences, had sought confirmation from U.N. authorities that Moses was not involved in the decision-making process. She had been assured he was not.²⁰ But both Hess and Noguchi must have known that it was Moses who had suggested the creation of a playground on the U.N. site in the first place.²¹ Moses had been an instrumental figure in securing the new grounds for the U.N. Headquarters in 1946, and as City Construction Coordinator was New York’s chief liaison for the project.²² Moses and the Parks Department were heavily involved with the landscaping of the site, and with his program to expand the City’s playground acreage still underway, the Parks Commissioner had developed a knack for finding places for new playgrounds, even on private land.²³ U.N. officials were initially opposed to Moses’ request that the U.N. set aside land for a playground; however, Moses convinced Secretary General Trygve Lie and the General Assembly to accept the proposition in the spring of 1951.²⁴ Presumably, the playground was a small gift back to the city for the donated property, regional development, and assistance, all of which were estimated to have cost the city upwards of \$25,000,000.²⁵ By the time Hess wrote to the Secretary General to solicit his endorsement of the project, landscape architect Gilmore Clarke, who had been handling the U.N. property landscaping on behalf of Robert Moses, had already consulted with the Parks Department and developed a design for the site. Lie graciously declined Hess’s offer of design and construction costs, stating that the project would be “inappropriate and would tend to unduly over emphasize the playground.”²⁶

For the first time since Noguchi began designing playgrounds, the press was quick to report on the rebuff of Noguchi’s model in favor of a Moses-backed design. Moses told the *New York Times*, “if they want to build it, it’s theirs, but I’m not interested in that sort of playground. If they want us to operate it, it’s got to be on our plans. We know what works.”²⁷ Noguchi felt he had “underestimated” the

Commissioner.²⁸ As a direct result of such experiences, he would tend towards private commissions in the coming decade, working directly with architects as a means of avoiding entanglement with building owners, government officials, and bureaucratic red tape.²⁹ Noguchi would only engage in the future design of play spaces with the backing of architects and commissions, but Hess, for her part, took advantage of the publicity. Utilizing her connections in the art world, she arranged a fitting response: within six months of the Secretary General's letter, in March 1952 the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), put Noguchi's model on display for the public. The exhibition was a remarkable success, and became the center of a series of significant changes. Most tangibly, public awareness of Moses' "rejection" of Noguchi's model, as it was reported in the press, erupted in criticism directed at Moses' intractable approach to playground design.³⁰ One of the first articles to address the issue was published in the *New York Times* less than a month after the MoMA exhibition opened, featuring a playful illustration of elements in Noguchi's playground. The author tentatively praised Moses' equipment for its efficiency and safety, but suggested "perhaps they could do more," as "childhood is a time for developing muscles and physical coordination... but it is also a time for developing the imagination and an awareness of and sensitivity to beauty... such considerations are more than 'arty.' They are of basic importance."³¹ In the coming decades, such thinking would lead to changes in how the City addressed playgrounds after Moses' retirement as Parks Commissioner in 1960. And more immediately in the early 1950s, new attention was paid to creative aspects of playgrounds in the U.S.

Another change to take place after the exhibition of Noguchi's model was the unprecedented increase in opportunities for artists to contribute to the development of play equipment and spaces, due in no small part to MoMA's sustained interest in designs for play. In the 1950s, MoMA had become a leading institution for, among other things, the promotion of artful industrial design, and following the display of the *United Nations Playground* model began to make the design of playground equipment part of that program. In 1954 MoMA, together with toy-company turned play-equipment designers Creative Playthings, Inc., co-sponsored a "Play Sculpture Competition," which resulted in over 350 entries, and a frenzy of support in the press.³² Other arts institutions would follow suit, such as the Corcoran Gallery School of Art's "National Playground Sculpture Competition" in 1967. Outside the walls of museums, however, the organizations responsible for the design and creation of public spaces and amenities such as playgrounds remained largely conservative. Despite growing opposition to Moses' methods and the rising interest in the design of play equipment in the arts community, the New York City Parks Department continued to approach the design of playgrounds in much the same way it had since 1934. And while organizations responsible for the placement of public art in urban plazas in the

postwar years began to express a new interest in the work of modernist, abstract sculptors, it would be several decades before concepts of site-specificity and community integration shifted, ushering in such opportunities for artists in the public sphere.

For Noguchi, the display of the *United Nations Playground* model provided his involvement in playground design its largest public recognition to date and, for a time, established his name in the field of playground design.³³ *ARTNews* editor Thomas Hess, from his biased position as Audrey Hess's husband, reviewed Noguchi's model as "what might have been one of the most important integrations of modern art with daily life in recent years."³⁴ In 1953, Creative Playthings, Inc., offered Noguchi an advisory role for their new playground division, which he accepted.³⁵ But Noguchi's interest in designing spaces for living was never limited to playgrounds, and in the 1950s he gained his first opportunities to construct sculptural environments through collaborations with architects. One of the earliest was the garden and interior faculty room at Keio University in Japan, *Shin Banraisha* (1951–1952), an environmental memorial to Noguchi's father, poet Yonejirō Noguchi, built in collaboration with architect Yoshiro Taniguchi. Towards the end of the decade, Noguchi completed work with Marcel Breuer on the *Garden for UNESCO* in Paris (1956–1958). It would be these projects and other environments, not his playgrounds, which would establish Noguchi's name in the expanding field of landscape design and public art. But, in Audrey Hess, Noguchi had found a dedicated patron who had continued to promote the *United Nations Playground* model throughout the decade. In 1960, a group on Manhattan's Upper West Side interested in restoring a derelict 1930s playground in Riverside Park between the West Side Highway and 103rd Street approached her to ask Noguchi to participate.³⁶ Reluctant at first based on his past difficulties with playgrounds and his busy schedule abroad, Noguchi accepted the task owing to two factors. First was the new leadership of Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris who, as Hess had assured Noguchi, had expressed "his *wholehearted* interest and almost certain approval" of the project.³⁷ Second, Hess had suggested to Noguchi that an architect could be invited to collaborate. Noguchi joined the project in December 1960, and in August 1961 architect Louis I. Kahn was asked to participate.³⁸

Noguchi and Kahn began their five-year collaboration in the fall of 1961. All told, they would create over a dozen models. It was an ideal moment for the project in some ways, as both men were reaching the peak of their respective careers, and public interest in new approaches to playground design had grown since the end of the Moses era. Unfortunately, the Parks Department, even without Moses, turned out to be a major obstacle. Responding to the first proposal in January 1962, Commissioner Morris, expecting something on a much smaller scale, complained that Noguchi and Kahn had "permitted their talented imagination to soar with the

result that we were presented with the design for an unjustifiable architectural monument.”³⁹ A resolution to Morris’s complaints was found when Hess offered to raise half the funds for the playground if it were presented as a memorial to her aunt, Adele Rosenwald Levy, a well-known philanthropist and community activist who had died in 1960.⁴⁰ The offer of funding was too good for Morris to refuse, and it was soon reported that Mayor Robert F. Wagner had backed the project from its inception.⁴¹ However, the Parks Department would continue to obstruct the project in a variety of ways, requesting numerous changes and setting arbitrary deadlines. Kahn expressed concern that the Parks Department was acting too quickly, explaining at one point that a 1962 model was merely a “pre-preliminary” idea (Figure 5).⁴² But the Department pushed the model through to the New York



Figure 5. Isamu Noguchi and Louis I. Kahn. Detail of model for the *Adele Rosenwald Levy Memorial Playground*. 1961–1962. Plaster. Photo: Kevin Noble. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. View of amphitheater (top left) with “step pyramid” and twin “slide mountains” (center right); along the bottom edge of the model are a series of play equipment; community center would be underground beneath the amphitheater.

City Art Commission, where it was reviewed and rejected with both Kahn and Noguchi absent from the meeting, both busy with projects abroad.⁴³

The problems securing the approval of both the Art Commission and the Parks Department would shortly become only one part of the project's impediments. While Noguchi and Kahn developed a third proposal in February 1963 to answer the Art Commission's concerns, a group of nearby residents, believing that open park space would be tragically lost to the concrete structures, formed the Riverside Parks and Playgrounds Committee aimed at stopping the project by initializing legal action. In June, the group obtained a State Supreme Court order permitting access to the Parks Department files on the Riverside Playground plans. They claimed that the plan was being "railroaded through" using Morris's first letter of disapproval as proof.⁴⁴ Opponents began picketing the homes of Hess and other supporters of the project, calling the plans "largely vainglorious, rather than useful."⁴⁵

While a growing public debate regarding appropriate use of parkland ensued, Noguchi and Kahn focused most of their energies on responding to the Parks Department's frequent requests for changes. The original three-block area was reduced to one block. Details of the play elements designed by Noguchi were requested to assess safety. As the project evolved, Kahn focused more on subterranean community centers and Noguchi on a central playground area and play sculptures. Finally, when a fourth plan was unveiled at a community meeting on February 4, 1964, the model was lauded in the press (Figure 6). It was reported to be a "fanciful wonderland for children," and was endorsed by a *New York Times* editorial, which claimed the men had "skillfully and imaginatively taken advantage of the [land's] contours in a way that improves the landscaping without any new above-ground structures."⁴⁶ The design received substantial praise for its architectural qualities and innovative, unconventional take on playground design. The fourth design was a turning point for Noguchi as well. The models show the full culmination of the ideas expressed in his earlier playgrounds. They include "slide mountain" elements, earth mounds with cut-away slopes for sliding, taken from the idea first expressed in *Play Mountain*. The "step pyramid," which was introduced in the *United Nations Playground*, is included in nearly all of the Riverside models, for simple climbing and jumping activities. Water features proposed in *Contoured Playground* are also present. Additionally, the Riverside project gave Noguchi an opportunity to develop new free-standing equipment models. This work would result in the development of his *Octetra* (Figure 7) play sculptures in 1968, and the impressive *Slide Mantra* (Figure 8) sculpture in 1986.

Throughout 1964, the Parks Department requested changes to keep the project within budget, and it was not until 1965 that the final model was completed. On December 29, 1965 Mayor Wagner held a public signing for the playground's City contract. At the ceremony he claimed that throughout his twelve years in office,



Figure 6. Isamu Noguchi and Louis I. Kahn. Detail of model for the *Adele Rosenwald Levy Memorial Playground*. 1964. Plaster. Photo: Kevin Noble. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York; view of central play area bordered by entrances to the subterranean community center.

“there have been very few projects proposals which have encountered more obstacles, hurdles, hindrances, stumbling blocks and difficulties than this one.”⁴⁷ However, 1965 was an election year. The Democratic Wagner was to be succeeded in three days by Republican John V. Lindsay who had pledged to fix the City’s growing fiscal and economic problems. The *Adele Rosenwald Levy Memorial Playground*, with half of the project’s cost promised from the city, was an easy target. Furthermore, the bickering among community groups and pending legal action had not been resolved. The project was ultimately abandoned in late 1966 after a taxpayers’ suit was ruled in favor of the project’s opponents owing to shortage of city funds. Opponents had also instituted new action to stop any city efforts to overrule the State Supreme Court decision, this time alleging “improper use of park land.”⁴⁸ Hess and project supporters accused the Lindsay administration of deliberately hindering the project and withdrew the offer of funding.⁴⁹

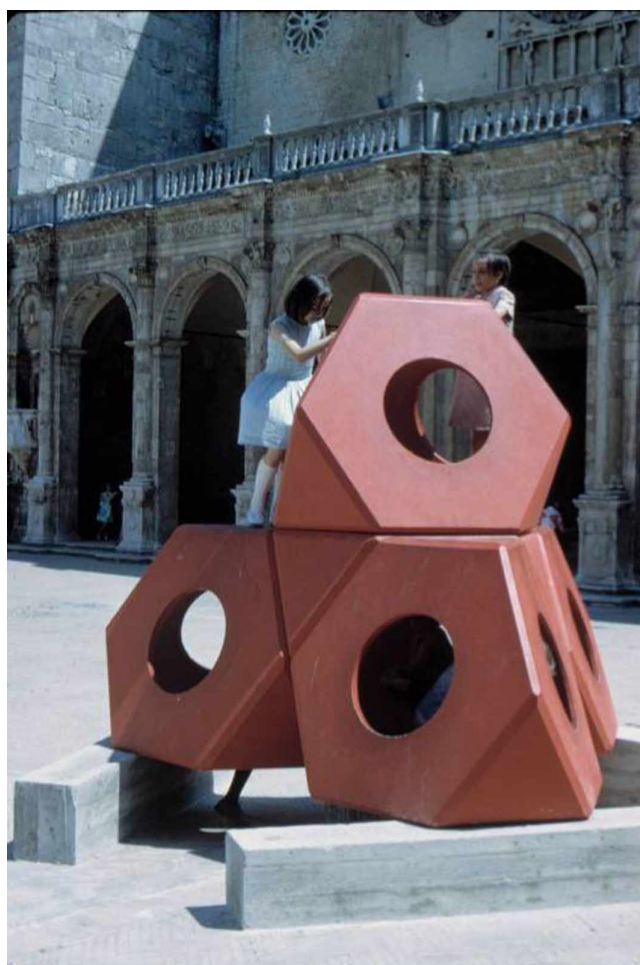


Figure 7. Isamu Noguchi. *Octerta*, installed in Spoleto, Italy. 1968. Concrete. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

Nevertheless, the *Adele Levy Memorial Playground* project sat at the cusp of a series of important changes in the realms of art and civic spaces. By 1967, the European-developed concept of adventure playgrounds, which encouraged the inclusion of unusual forms and materials in playground design to spark children's imagination, emerged in the U.S. *Life* magazine reported on two new adventure playgrounds in New York, one designed by Jerry Lieberman in Riverside Park, not far from the proposed site for Noguchi and Kahn's recently abandoned project, and another by landscape architect Richard Dattner in Central Park.⁵⁰ Dattner would become a leading figure in New York's new playground movement, one that informs the City's most recent approach to playground development. The impact of Noguchi and Kahn's playground, albeit unrealized, cannot be underestimated. The "imaginative" design significantly influenced Dattner, beginning with his



Figure 8. Isamu Noguchi. *Slide Mantra*, installed on the American Pavilion of the 1986 Venice Biennale (currently located in Bayfront Park, Miami, Florida). 1986. Marble. Photo: Shiego Anzai. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

design of the playground featured in *Life* magazine.⁵¹ Historian Susan Solomon calls Noguchi and Kahn's work a "breakthrough for playground development."⁵²

The end of the *Adele Levy Memorial Playground* project also coincided with an interesting time in the history of art in public spaces. In 1963, the General Services Administration's (GSA) Art-in-Architecture Program was established, followed in 1967 by the National Endowment for the Arts's (NEA) Art in Public Places Program, marking a significant expansion of public interest in public art. However, with the initial focus of such programs on the adornment of federal buildings, public art of this era was more subservient to architecture and characterized by discrete, monumental sculpture by major names in modern art. Around the same time, in the 1960s and '70s emerging practices broadly understood under the umbrella

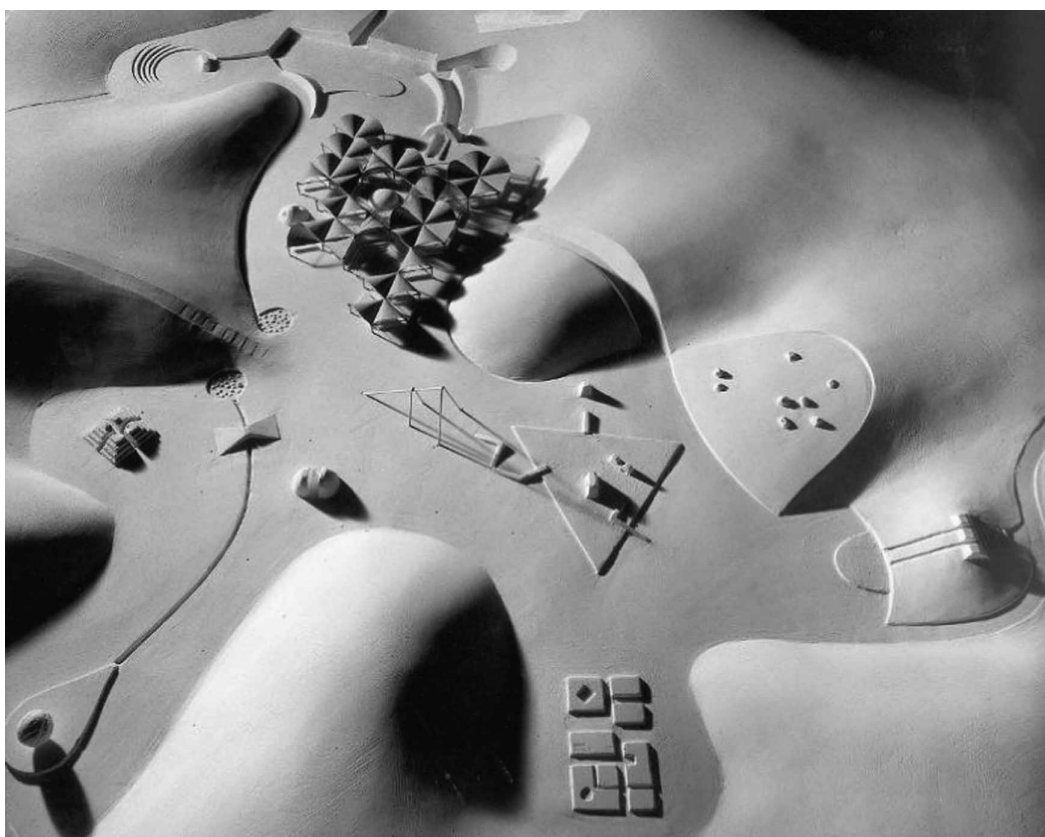


Figure 9. Isamu Noguchi. Detail of model for *Playground for Kodomo No Kuni*, project partially realized in Yokohama, Japan (destroyed). 1965–1966. Plaster. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. Clustered shapes in top right corner are the sheltered play area; this and the surrounding landscaping were completed; play elements in the lower half of the image are not known to have been finished.

term of “site-specific” art – land art, installation art, happenings, and the like – were adopted within museum and gallery settings. But these changes were not quickly implemented in the public arena. As art historian Miwon Kwon notes, it was not until 1974 that art dealing with aspects of site-specificity was first sanctioned in the guidelines of organizations funding public art.⁵³ Eventually these changes would lead to the institutional acceptance of an artist’s wishes to build a park, a garden, or even a playground. In the late 1960s, playgrounds were still the domain of government programming, internally designed and developed as public spaces within city-owned and -operated parkland much as they had been since the turn of the twentieth century. But, significantly, what Noguchi experienced with the patronage of Audrey Hess would be a growing trend that would change the dynamic. Increasingly after 1960, community organizations and charities took on a leading

role in the commissioning of areas for play, eventually challenging the exclusivity of playground design and placement from the authority of municipal departments.⁵⁴ The influx of private patronage would allow for greater freedom in selecting designers for playgrounds, and since MoMA's investment in artfully designed play equipment in the 1950s, more artists were working in the field.

Noguchi is a unique figure within this history of art and public space, one who seemingly succeeded in transcending the traditional boundaries between sculptor and landscape designer. Beginning in the 1950s, the collaborations Noguchi had with architects such as Kenzo Tange in Japan, and Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in the U.S. involved the environmental design of gardens, parks and plazas. These were largely private commissions until by the 1970s he had established a reputation as a capable landscape architect. Cities such as Detroit and Miami hired Noguchi to design plazas and parks as a hybrid sculptor/landscape designer. But Noguchi's gardens, parks and plazas were not fully received as public art, something that was more akin to his own view of his practice. Noguchi maintained, "I don't go about trying to be a landscapist. I'm only a sculptor."⁵⁵ More often than not, however, to art critics a garden was simply a garden, not a public sculpture. Interestingly, the works were not accepted by the landscape architecture community either, but instead dismissed as art.⁵⁶ Noguchi's involvement in playground design after 1960 was markedly more successful than



Figure 10. Isamu Noguchi. *Playscapes*, Piedmont Park, Atlanta, Georgia. 1975–76. Photo: Charlie B. Spaht.

his past three decades of failed projects. But this was not so much due to developing shifts in public art and playground design as much as it was to his increased professional reputation in areas of landscape design.

By the time Noguchi finally saw one of his playgrounds built he was “past [his] age of interest,” and arguably, Noguchi’s playgrounds after the *Adele Levy Memorial Playground* did not match the inventiveness of his previous designs.⁵⁷ His first realized playground, begun when the Riverside project still seemed viable, was with architect Yoshio Otani at a new children’s park in Yokohama, Japan, *Playground for Kodomo No Kuni* (1965–1966; Figure 9). Construction began immediately under the patronage of the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan.⁵⁸ A sheltered area with interior spaces and water elements, a sandbox, and small amphitheater were built over the course of 1965 and 1966. However, funding eventually expired leaving many elements in Noguchi’s innovative model unrealized, which may explain why the playground is not a major part of his legacy.⁵⁹ A decade later in 1976, Noguchi realized his first playground in the U.S., *Playscapes* (1975–1976; Figure 10) in Atlanta, Georgia, a collection of his patented, sculptural play equipment, including the realization of the angular swing set from *Play Equipment for Ala Moana Park*. The site was built in Piedmont Park as part of the “Art in the Parks” project with the High Museum of Art. Noguchi

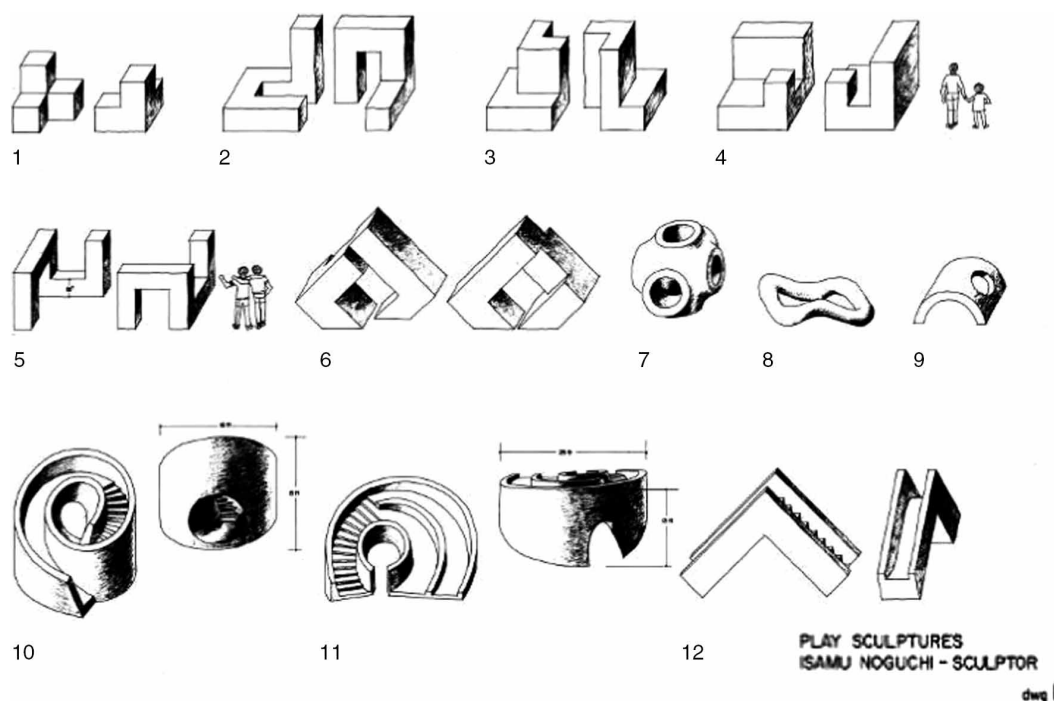


Figure 11. Isamu Noguchi. Drawing for *Play Sculptures*. c.1966–1976. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

believed that this private sponsorship was the main reason it was built, as it bypassed the Atlanta Parks Department.⁶⁰ But he had also tempered his vision from earlier designs, excluding earth modulations in favor of sited equipment. Indeed, by the late 1960s, Noguchi's interests in playground design leaned more towards equipment and play sculptures – something he could design and manufacture himself (Figure 11). But Noguchi's last design for public space returned in a literal way to some of his earliest notions of earth forms and play. Noguchi died shortly after proposing the project in 1988, and *Moere-numa Koen* (1988–2004; Figure 12), was realized posthumously in Sapporo, Japan, based on his scale model. The park includes the largest collection of Noguchi's manufactured play equipment available anywhere, as well as a version of Noguchi's massive, carved *Slide Mantra*. The park also includes a tribute to the concept of *Play Mountain*. Unfortunately, the *Moere-numa Play Mountain* does not function as the original was intended, existing as more of a rural vantage-point than the original city-based concept.

Much has changed since Noguchi first proposed *Play Mountain* to Robert Moses in 1934. Significantly, the politics of public space and artist's roles within the civic sphere have been radically altered. By the end of the 1970s, the NEA



Figure 12. Isamu Noguchi. Play equipment area of *Moere-numa Koen*, Sapporo, Japan. 1988–2004.
© The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

endorsed a “wide range of possibilities for art in public situations,” including “earthworks, environmental art, and not-traditional media, such as artificial lighting.”⁶¹ This was the start of a change that made it possible for artists to engage in the design of public spaces, such as plazas, parks, and playgrounds. In the history of playground design, the past half-century has been a period of renaissance. Since the emergence of adventure playgrounds in the U.S. in the 1960s, a sustained focus on the design, function, and purpose of playgrounds has encouraged new participation and ideas, including those of artists. Additionally, the boundaries between artist, designer, and architect can, in many cases, be nonexistent.

It is hard to pinpoint the precise degree of influence of an unrealized artwork on contemporary art. Perhaps it is easiest to distinguish the foresight of Noguchi’s playgrounds echoed in today’s art, if not their direct influence. For example, in the late 1980s, performance artist Vito Acconci opened Acconci Studio, crossing the boundary between artist and landscape designer much as Noguchi had done. Acconci Studio has designed several playgrounds and play sculptures. The earliest to be realized is *Land of Boats* (1987–1991; Figure 13) for Saint Aubin Park in Detroit. Interpretive, novel, and based in principles of environmental art and post-minimalist sculpture, the playground is composed of low steps, a shallow dip in the



Figure 13. Acconci Studio. *Land of Boats*, Saint Aubin Park, Detroit, Michigan. 1987–1991. © Acconci Studio.



Figure 14. Mary Miss. Model for *Playground for Santa Fe Railyard Park*, Santa Fe, New Mexico. 2002–2008. © Mary Miss.

land, and concrete sailboat elements, partially “submerged” in the earth. In addition to Acconci’s work in playground design, in 2008, a sculptor much engaged in the dialogue of public art, Mary Miss, completed a playground as part of her collaboration with Ken Smith Landscape Architecture on the *Santa Fe Railyard Park and Plaza* (Figure 14). Under the support of the Trust for Public Land, Miss developed an alternative area for children’s play as part of the larger redevelopment scheme. The play area is bordered by a ring of stones featuring climbing nets, a curved embankment with slides and a climbing wall, a toddler’s area, and a small stepped area to serve for gatherings and performances. But changes in art practices are also matched by changes in what was once the most powerful impediment to Noguchi’s realization of his playground designs, the New York City Parks Department. Perhaps the most remarkable change can be viewed in the City’s 2008 completion of a new playground in Rainey Park, Queens. The site was built to directly reference some of Noguchi’s visions for playgrounds,



Figure 15. Rainey Park Playground, Long Island City, Queens, New York. Photo: Author.

including two versions of his slide mountains (Figure 15). As part of the Department's focus on thematic playgrounds tailored to neighborhoods, the playground is located only blocks away from Noguchi's museum and former studio in Long Island City. The playground at Rainey Park is indicative of the New York City Parks Department's contemporary focus on unique and experimental play spaces, often created in conjunction with noted architects and landscape designers.⁶²

These changes signal a new environment in which artists now work, and a new civic sphere that accommodates the visions of artists in respect of public spaces for community use and appreciation. Noguchi's playgrounds were on the cusp of many of these developments. While he was not the sole source of these changes, as one perpetually ahead of the curve and outside of trends Noguchi is a figure whose impact on history can always be reassessed. In her book, Solomon devotes a number of pages to Noguchi's impact on the history of American playgrounds. She notes that, with so few of his designs realized, Noguchi did not emerge as one lauded for such contributions.⁶³ Yet, to an extent, his wider, subsidiary effect on history may be discerned in the stories of his playgrounds. Noguchi's innovative

United Nations Playground drew the attention of younger artists to playgrounds and play sculpture. His *Adele Levy Memorial Playground* may indeed have been an inspiring force for today's landscape architects, who as students were exposed to new possibilities inherent in Noguchi and Kahn's design. In his 1968 autobiography, Noguchi credited *Play Mountain* as "the progenitor of playgrounds as sculptural landscapes."⁶⁴ It is unclear what specifically he had in mind when he made this statement – the significant changes recognizable today had not fully taken place. But after all, he may have been right.

NOTES

¹ For more on Moses' playgrounds and related impact, see Hillary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds., *Robert Moses and the Modern City* (New York, Queens Museum of Art, 2007), 174–83.

² The first playgrounds built in New York were privately sponsored playgrounds on public land, organized by the Reform Era group Outdoor Recreation League (ORL) between 1898 and 1902. The City of New York assumed operation of ORL playgrounds in 1902. Seward Park (Canal and Essex Streets at East Broadway) built in 1903, was the City's first municipally built and run playground. It became a model for the City's future playground development, notably Robert Moses' program. For more history of the City's playgrounds see "Playgrounds in Parks," *New York City Department of Parks & Recreation*, available at: http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_about/parks_history/playgrounds.html (accessed 11 Aug. 2010).

³ Paul Cummings, "Interview with Isamu Noguchi," The Smithsonian Archives of American Art, conducted on November 7, 1973, available at: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/noguch73.html> (accessed 4 Apr. 2009; 15 Mar. 2010).

⁴ For a recent account of Noguchi's broad contributions to public space, see Ana Maria Torres, *Isamu Noguchi A Study of Space* (New York, Monacelli Press, 2000).

⁵ Cummings, "Interview."

⁶ A new book by Shoji Sadao, entitled *Best of Friends*, set for publication in 2011, will explore this relationship.

⁷ Isamu Noguchi, "Towards a Reintegration of the Arts," *College Art Journal* 9 no. 1 (Autumn 1949): 59.

⁸ Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁰ Letter, James V. Mulholand to Howard Myers of the Architectural Forum, 14 January 1941, file "Playgrounds – 1940–1975" at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

¹¹ Letter, James V. Mulholand to Isamu Noguchi, 29 December 1947, file "Playgrounds – 1940–1975" at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

¹² The New York City Parks Department initiated its "Sculpture in Environments" program in 1967, its first program to formally engage contemporary art, and the forerunner of the Department's current Art in the Parks program. For recent history of art in New York City's parks see *The Outdoor Gallery: 40 Years of Public Art in New York City Parks*, exhibition brochure, (13 September–11 November 2007), available at http://www.nycgovparks.org/web/download/download.php?file 1/4/sub_about/parks_history/index_image_thumbs/40_years_public_art.pdf (accessed 21 August 2010).

¹³ Noguchi, *Sculptor's World*, 23. Noguchi claimed he was turned down by the WPA's New York Director of the Art section Aubrey McMann because he had sculpted an unflattering portrait of her.

¹⁴ European playgrounds were far more progressive at an earlier point than in the U.S., with the advent of "adventure playgrounds" in Copenhagen in the 1940s. For more on this history see Susan

G. Solomon, *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space* (London: University Press of New England, 2005), 12–22.

¹⁵ Solomon, *American Playgrounds*, 10.

¹⁶ Isamu Noguchi, "Playground Equipment," *Architectural Forum* 72 (Oct. 1940): 245.

¹⁷ Press release, "To City [sic] editors and motion picture editors for immediate release," 10 September 1947, file "Playground Sculptures – Columbia Pictures Copyright Infringement 1947" at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

¹⁸ Audrey Hess, Timeline of Events, no date, file "United Nations – Playground 1951–1952," at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum. Hess also hired architect Julian Whittlesey of Mayer & Whittlesey to assist in the project, a shrewd decision as it lent a degree of credibility to a project that relied on the design of a sculptor who had never before realized a playground. While there is no indication that he collaborated with Noguchi in the design, Whittlesey drew up plans and helped represent Noguchi's model at meetings when Noguchi could not be present, as he was frequently in Japan between 1950 and 1952.

¹⁹ Hess, Timeline, "Letter, Hess to Lie," 14 August 1951.

²⁰ Hess, Timeline, "Meeting, Bennett, Hess, Whittlesey," 4 May 1951.

²¹ In December 1949, the *New York Times* reported that Moses had requested that one acre of the seventeen-acre site be set aside in the northeast section for use by neighborhood children, which is likely how Hess gained knowledge of the plans in the first place. The U.N. did not formally agree to the City's request until April of 1951, after Noguchi had completed the model and Hess had begun her campaign for support. George Barrett, "Moses Wants Acre of Land In U.N. Site for Playground," *New York Times*, 16 Dec. 1949, 1.

²² For a full account of the history of the founding of the United Nations headquarters and Moses' involvement, see Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), chapter 7, 601–39.

²³ Public schools were one of the most frequent examples of this tendency. Under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education, Moses would intercede to insist that abandoned school property be demolished and redeveloped as playgrounds, which would remain open after school hours under Parks Department supervision. Ballon and Jackson, eds., *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, 180.

²⁴ "Lie Agrees to Have Playground At U.N." *New York Times*, 7 Apr. 1951, 14.

²⁵ Moses was quick to remind Lie and the U.N. Planning Commission of these contributions, and even had accused the U.N. of a "failure to cooperate and proceed with its part of the landscaping and joint construction incorporated in an agreement made in 1947." See Aline B. Louchheim, "United Nations Rejects Model Playground: Moses Project is Accepted Instead," *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 1951, 1.

²⁶ Hess, Timeline, "Letter, Lie to Hess," 28 Sept. 1951.

²⁷ Louchheim, "United Nations Rejects Model Playground," 1.

²⁸ Noguchi, *Sculptor's World*, 176–7.

²⁹ Cummings, "Interview."

³⁰ Louchheim, "United Nations Rejects Model Playground," 1.

³¹ Dorothy Barclay, "Playgrounds That Are Something More," *New York Times*, 20 Apr. 1952, SM52.

³² Solomon, *American Playgrounds*, 30–1.

³³ Noguchi received a flurry of letters of support and inquires as a result of the continuing promotion and prolonged display of the United Nations Playground model. See file "Playgrounds 1940–1947, 1953–67, 1975," at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

³⁴ TBH, "The Rejected Playground," *Art News* 5 (Apr. 1952), 15.

³⁵ Letter, Frank Caplan, Director of Creative Playthings, Inc. to Mr. Nagouchi [sic], 2 June 1953, file "Playgrounds 1940–1947, 1953–67, 1975," at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum. The extent of Noguchi's role is unclear, but in October 1953 he was listed as part of the company's "staff" of "leading designers, sculptors, engineers, educators and landscape architects" in an advertisement in *Recreation Magazine* (Sept. 1953), 201.

³⁶ Letter, Hess to Raymond S. Rubinow of the J. M. Kaplan Fund, 17 June 1961, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1960–1961,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum. The group was the Bloomingdale Conservation Project, which included members of United Neighbor Houses and the City Planning Commission.

³⁷ Letter, Hess to Noguchi, 21 October 1960, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1960–1961,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

³⁸ Noguchi would claim the choice of Kahn was his idea. See, Isamu Noguchi, “The Road I Have Walked,” *Play Mountain: Noguchi + Kahn* (Tokyo: Watari-um 1996), 100. But it is clear that the project’s organizers played a larger role in securing his participation. See letter, Helen M. Harris to Louis Kahn, 23 August 1961, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1960–1961,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

³⁹ Letter, Commissioner Newbold Morris to Helen Harris of the United Neighborhood Houses of New York, Inc, 20 February 1962, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1962–63,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum. Morris also went further to suggest that Noguchi and Kahn’s involvement would draw crowds of the “avant-garde” personalities still flocking to the recently opened Guggenheim Museum on Fifth Avenue and 89th Street.

⁴⁰ Letter, Hess to Morris, 23 May 1962, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1962–63,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

⁴¹ Samuel Kaplan, “Play Area To Fit Contours of Park,” *New York Times*, 24 Oct. 1962, 41. Mayor Wagner was also a close personal friend of Adele Levy. See “Rites for Mrs. Levy Set,” *New York Times*, 14 Mar. 1960.

⁴² Letter, John Mulcahy to Kahn-Noguchi Company, 5 Dec. 1962, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1962–63,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

⁴³ Letter, David Wisdom, Assistant to Louis Kahn, to Noguchi, 10 Jan. 1963, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1962–63,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum.

⁴⁴ Farnsworth Fowle, “Riverside Group Scores Park Plan,” *New York Times*, 2 Oct. 1963, 30.

⁴⁵ “Apology Made in Park Dispute,” *New York Times*, 6 Oct. 1963, 68.

⁴⁶ “Parks Are For Park Purposes,” *New York Times*, 8 Feb. 1964, 22. Also see Joseph Lelyveld, “Model Play Area For Park Shown,” *New York Times*, 5 Feb. 1964, 37. “Kahn–Noguchi Playground Proposed for New York,” “News Report,” *Progressive Architecture* (Mar. 1964): 67.

⁴⁷ Samuel Kaplan, “Mayor Signs Pact for Play Center,” *New York Times*, 30 Dec. 1965, 31.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Edith Evans Asbury, “Group Abandons Levy Memorial,” *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 1966, 45.

⁵⁰ “A Child’s Garden of Plastic Delights,” *Life* 63 no. 2 (14 Jul. 1967): 74–7; “Out of Peacetime Rubble, a Fanciful Landscape,” Ibid., 78.

⁵¹ Richard Dattner, *Design for Play* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1969), 66.

⁵² Solomon, *American Playgrounds*, 50.

⁵³ For more on this history, see Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), chapter 3, 56–99.

⁵⁴ For more on the history and current state of playground design and oversight, see Solomon, *American Playgrounds*.

⁵⁵ Cummings, “Interview.”

⁵⁶ See Peter Walker’s essay in “The Landscapes of Noguchi,” *Landscape Architecture* 80 (Apr. 1990): 37.

⁵⁷ Noguchi, *Sculptor’s World*, 177. When Hess approached Noguchi with a commission for the Adele Levy Memorial Playground he reflected that he felt “sad . . . that the possibility of actually building [a playground] presented itself when it was past my age of interest.”

⁵⁸ Ibid., 179.

⁵⁹ *Playground for Kodomo No Kuni* is often described as complete and, indeed, it is difficult today to determine what was ultimately built, as the site was eventually destroyed. But in a 1998 essay, the project’s architect Sachio Otani writes: “Unfortunately, the inadequacies of the budget were complicated by the lack of precision for maintenance, and the plan was only partially

realized . . . rather than hoping to see a less than perfect replica which might resemble the original in appearance only, I believe that the plaster model Isamu made of this project should be preserved as his work until a firm commitment to adhere to his original intention is made." Sachio Otani, "A Memory of Isamu Noguchi," *Play Mountain: Isamu Noguchi + Louis Kahn*, trans. Masako Otuka (Tokyo: Watari-um, 1996), 142.

⁶⁰ Noguchi as quoted in *Isamu Noguchi, The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 176.

⁶¹ Statement taken from the official Art-in-Public-Places grant application guidelines of the Visual Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 67. Originally cited in Mary Jane Jacob, "Outside the Loop," in *Culture in Action* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 54.

⁶² For more on New York City's current and historic involvement in playground design, particularly as it pertains to education and development, see Rebecca Mead, "State of Play: How Tot Lots Became Places to Build Children's Brains," *New Yorker* (10 Jul. 2010): 32–7.

⁶³ Solomon, *American Playgrounds*, 27.

⁶⁴ Noguchi, *Sculptor's World*, 22.

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