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Proposed Space:  
Isamu Noguchi's Five Playground Designs For New York City

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by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Between 1933-1966 American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) created a total of five playground designs for locations in Manhattan. Unfortunately, despite his continuing efforts, none were realized. The designs, laid out in the existent relief carvings with which he developed his ideas, are remarkably unusually, encompassing earth modulations and untraditional sculptural forms developed for play. For Noguchi, these playgrounds would have constructively merged both his sculptural program and a utilitarian, civic function. Yet, for New York City, the ideas were impractical, and too radical. Recently, the city's public art programs have begun to explore themes that seemingly mimic the ideas Noguchi laid out in these proposals, as much as eight decades ago. An exploration of Noguchi's five unrealized playground designs will reveal the unique position of the proposed playgrounds in the history of the city's cultural and civic development, and the true value that these works maintain, even as unrealized proposals.

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## INTRODUCTION

New York City's current relationship with contemporary public art may be well-illustrated by the examples of two upcoming projects: in January 2008, it was announced that Danish-born artist Olafur Eliasson's (b. 1967) environmental art work, *The New York City Waterfalls*, will be on display in the city's water ways from mid-July to mid-October 2008. This massive work will consist of four man-made waterfalls installed at sites at the Brooklyn anchorage of the Brooklyn Bridge, between Piers 4 and 5 in Brooklyn, in Lower Manhattan at Pier 35, and on the north shore of Governors Island. Commissioned by the Public Art Fund, Eliasson is well known for his audience-engaging, often ephemeral installations, which explore the sensory experiences by creating or altering spaces. Beyond the gallery, he brings these same considerations to outdoor public art; he explains of the New York project:

I have tried to work with today's complex notion of public spaces. The *Waterfalls* [...] will give people the possibility to reconsider their relationships to the spectacular surroundings, and I hope to evoke experiences that are both individual and enhance a sense of collectivity.<sup>1</sup>

Eliasson's approach is to make more than an object of art, but rather a contribution to the surrounding city space. For this, the project has drawn much praise both from within New York's art community and beyond. Particularly, city officials have rallied around the potential benefits of such work. In the project's press announcement, Mayor Michael Bloomberg praised the work of both Eliasson and the Public Art Fund stating that "public art is a signature of New York City," and "not only does public art excite and inspire New Yorkers, it helps draw visitors and adds millions of dollars into our economy."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Eliasson's approach to public art for New York is characteristic of just the type of art with which the city has become increasingly associated. The installations at Rockefeller Center, the "Art in the Parks" programs, and Jeanne-Claude and Christo's *The Gates* (2005) at Central Park, have each contributed to the city's art-friendly image. Today, New York is self-consciously on the forefront of progressive, environmental, and new media art installations which often alter its public spaces.

A second example of this relationship is to be found in New York City's parklands. The city has prided itself on the expansive and efficiently coordinated parks system throughout the five boroughs. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation particularly has sought to lead the country in the development of spaces for recreation and leisure, from the creation of the nation's first public park, Central Park in 1859, to the present. Increasingly since the 1960s, this agenda has included the intersection of art and park places, from installations, to artistic involvement in the design of buildings, furniture and landscaping.

An upcoming project for September 2008 reflects the department's progressive employment of art and design, and can further be seen to have grown from the city's broader urban arts program. Less high profile than Eliasson's *Waterfalls*, the project involves a small, but bold playground in Queens' Rainey Park, implemented by the Parks Department's Capital Projects Division (CPD). Charged with redesigning and rebuilding existing parks throughout the city, the CPD often has taken the arts into consideration in their in-house design projects; specifically, the Rainey playground design was inspired by the work of the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988). The new playground will include several pseudo-Noguchi forms, including two mounds for

climbing with embedded metal slides, a series of “spinners,” a low climbing wall, spray shower, swings, and seating. The park certainly will reflect the city’s broader engagement with art for shaping its public spaces, just as the *Waterfalls* project will on a larger scale.

What these two projects have in common is their evidence of New York City’s openness to the fine arts, not just for monuments and decorative effects in streets and plazas, but for the shaping of civic space in parks and beyond. Such a relationship gives artists the opportunity to contribute in areas often limited to the authority of architects, landscape designers, and city planners. This unique relationship opens up the potential for environmental art, earthworks, and other large-scale projects to play a significant role in the shaping of New York’s urban environment.

Much of this situation is new: despite the prosperity of urban environmental art in New York’s public places today, the relationship between the city and public art has changed dramatically over time, even over the course of just a few decades. The very idea of urban engagement with art specifically concerned with altering or improving public space – with large scaled, temporary environmental artworks, or inspired utilitarian park spaces – is only recently in vogue. Evidence of the changes are not hard to locate: there are traces of the past all around the city, in some of the older fixed outdoor sculptures and monuments or in the traditionally landscaped and equipped parks. And interestingly, the not-so-distant past may also be observed in the example of the upcoming Rainey Park playground. The Capital Projects Division’s interest in bringing to life the ideas of Isamu Noguchi is notable for what it points out about the city’s changing relationship with art, public space, and park space.



The CPD's selected inspiration is a pointed and deliberate choice, most overtly due to the fact that Noguchi's former residence and current museum, the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, is directly across the street from the playground construction on Vernon Boulevard. The park improvements will undoubtedly be a welcome contribution from the city for visitors to the museum and borough. But a second reason why Noguchi is to be honored with a playground is also historically involved. The sculptor – who during his lifetime created a vast body of work from formal abstract sculptures, to public environments, and industrial designs – also designed a handful of playgrounds, several of which were proposed to New York City and never built. The new Rainey Park playground is an interesting attempt by the city to have a Noguchi-styled playground after five designed by the artist in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century all eventually failed.

For those familiar with this secondary reason, and familiar with the five New York playground designs that now occupy a specific “unrealized” category of the sculptor's catalog, the upcoming Rainey playground may occur as an odd endeavor for the city. However, for those only familiar with New York's commitment to public art, the playground will be a welcome, whimsical addition to a citywide beatification program. Regardless, Noguchi's unrealized playground designs have here and elsewhere exerted their significance, albeit as much as seven decades in the past. The historical worth of his playgrounds is implied by the CPD's choice and design.

Furthermore, the upcoming appearance of projects such as *Waterfalls* and the Rainey playground – both signifier's of the city's recent relationship with large-scale, urban, environmental art – can even more fully reveal the significance of Noguchi's unrealized playgrounds. Influenced by New York City's relationship with public art

today, this thesis will explore and emphasize the historical value of Noguchi's five unrealized New York playground designs.

Between 1933-1966 Noguchi created a total of five playground proposals for locations in Manhattan. Some he undertook on his own, and others with commissions. Unfortunately, he continually met with difficulties in implementation. These failures were a significant disappointment to the sculptor: Noguchi would later claim that, despite having seen a wide variety of his public projects realized in New York and around the world, his best works, referring specifically to his playgrounds, had never been built.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, Noguchi developed a marked bitterness towards the New York City Parks Department, which seemed to him to have contributed to the eventual failure of each playground. His personal reminiscences have since made up the majority of the project histories, creating an overall colored, if not inaccurate representation of each playground's saga. The myth constructed is of a designer-sculptor whose vision was time after time coolly dismissed by a conservative parks commissioner, who had even successfully interceded beyond his own purview. Historically, the failure of Noguchi's playground designs for New York has been reduced to a classic man-verse-man anecdotal narrative.

The appeal of this perspective is, in fact, rooted in many truths. However, to say that one man or organization is behind the failure of five independent proposals, each of which had varying degrees of support and completeness, is to not credit this body of work with as much as it deserves. In truth, the reason why these works were not realized is due less to the disfavor of the Parks Department, and more to how remarkably unusual these designs were, both sculpturally, and compared to other notions of play space and public

art at the time. An exploration of Noguchi, New York City, public art and parks, and the playground designs themselves will help to accurately represent five of Noguchi's most underestimated projects.

This thesis will address several concerns. First, a discussion of Noguchi's philosophy of sculpture will help to contextualize the work and explain why he decided to build areas for play. Next, the history of each project will clarify misconceptions, and detail the decisions Noguchi made, the people and outside factors involved, and the complex reasons for each project's end. Finally, these projects will be placed in perspective with New York City's shifting involvement with the arts in urban space. Such an investigation will reveal the unique position of Noguchi's playgrounds in the history of the city's cultural and civic development, and the true value that these works maintain, even as unrealized proposals.

## I. NOGUCHI'S IDEOLOGY

It is first important to understand why Noguchi began creating playground designs. It is too easy to perceive his involvement in design as a separate part of his artistic vision, when, in fact, what sparked his interest in playgrounds was his broader social and artistic philosophy of sculpture. In 1933, Noguchi would create a series of proposals for large-scale projects, all of which used the principles of design – landscape design and industrial design – to create what he intended to be a new form of sculpture. These were his *Musical Weathervane* (fig. 1), an early product design – a fluted and illuminated weathervane – which was never manufactured, and three monumental proposals for earth sculptures, *Monument to the Plow* (figs. 2a, 2b), *Monument to Ben Franklin* (fig. 3), and his first playground, *Playmountain* (fig. 4). Eventually, Noguchi's dance sets for Martha Graham, furniture designs for Herman Miller and Knoll, parks, fountains, memorials and gardens for a variety of institutions and cities, as well as his personal exploration of sculpturally informed lighting – all of these ventures alongside his traditional sculpture would amount to an array of biographies and monographs dedicated to seemingly disparate concerns in his work. However, all connect back to Noguchi's larger social project; each was a potential new direction for the future of sculpture.<sup>4</sup>

Broadly understood, Noguchi's early impulse to theorize about sculpture was in line with a generation of artists questioning and preparing art for the future. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a common idea amongst the European modernists that the world had changed, whether it had been for the better or the worse, and that art's role within

this new world could and must be re-examined. This modern utopian idealism was based in a firm belief that the artist possessed the ability to improve, deconstruct, or reshape the world with his work. And, each movement, concerned with the same recognizable changes in the world which would necessitate a new art, was focused on a different solution.<sup>5</sup>

Noguchi was acutely aware of the changes around him. In the late 1920s he had lived in Paris, working in 1927 as an apprentice to Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) and socializing with other artists such as Alexander Calder, Morris Kantor, and Stuart Davis. In Paris, Noguchi developed his visual vocabulary for abstraction and form, and began to acquire an interest in the philosophical place of art in modern life. By the 1930s, Noguchi possessed his own theories for the future role of sculpture. Like the European modernists, he recognized a need for change in a changing world. Later on, he eloquently reflected on the notion of change, stating:

New concepts of the physical world and of psychology may give insights into knowledge, but the visible world, in human terms, is more than scientific truths [...] The promise of sculpture is to project these inner presences into forms that can be recognized as important and meaningful in themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Noguchi would recall his desire to bring sculpture into a more direct involvement with the common experience of living, as he had become increasingly concerned with art that could maintain a link with the general populous. He proposed “freeing itself from the museum-conscious pedestal and its false horizons, sculpture must re-enter the world proportionate to man.”<sup>7</sup> What was necessary was an understanding of how this could take place. Noguchi would arrive at a philosophy dedicated towards expanding the historical notion of sculpture beyond the creation of freestanding objects of aesthetic appreciation.

These ideas brought Noguchi to perceive design work – that of industrial products, stage sets, or, increasingly gardens, parks and playgrounds – as logical, sculptural solutions towards merging art and life.

Noguchi's 1933 designs, *Musical Weathervane*, *Monument to the Plow*, *Monument to Ben Franklin*, and *Playmountain*, were not conceived as a departure from sculpture, but as a new form of sculpture, remolded for modern living and the betterment of society. When *Monument to the Plow*, *Monument to Ben Franklin*, and *Playmountain* were first publicly exhibited in 1935 at Marie Harriman Gallery, he would underscore this fact by stating in a related article, "sculpture can be a vital force in man's daily life if projected into communal usefulness."<sup>8</sup>

Often overlooked in discussions of Noguchi's playground designs, and indeed in most of his public projects, is this connection to ideology. Noguchi has been seen to play the role of landscape designer or industrial designer where his proposal have been realized. Yet, when considering the philosophical agenda behind his work, such categorization removes Noguchi from the role of sculptor to utilitarian designer. These categorizations can, at worst, misrepresent his work. The five New York playground proposals have, for example, been duly accredited as potentially groundbreaking park designs. But without examining the designs as *sculpture*, primary to *park*, as the theory would imply, one important thing is missed. These works, beginning with *Playmountain*, were in essence proposals for large-scale sculptures – they were environmental public art before the term emerged.

This proposed way of considering Noguchi's playground designs will aid in the explanation of why the projects ultimately failed. Under such considerations, it is clear

that when Noguchi approached the New York City Parks Department with these works, he was not requesting that he be understood as an architect or engineer, qualified to construct efficient, safe, and producible equipment. Instead he was requesting of the department that it step outside of its standard mode of operation and accept nothing less than an experiment in modern art. Therefore, the difficulty Noguchi experienced in New York with his proposals for playgrounds was in part due to the understanding of art's place in public space at the time. These works were each a misunderstood innovation.

These ideas will lend to both the full understanding of the problems with each project, and to the significance of the works. The next chapters will provide a more detailed record of the playgrounds *Playmountain*, *Play Equipment*, *Contoured Playground*, the *United Nations Playground*, and the *Riverside Drive Playground* to further elaborate on the issues and significance of the individual works.

## II. PROJECT HISTORIES

### THE EARLY PROJECTS: *PLAYMOUNTAIN* (1933)

*Playmountain*, a remarkably well-conceived play space to be built entirely of variations in the earth surface, was the first of Noguchi's playground designs, as well as one of the earliest examples of his ambitious proposals for public works. The impetus behind this model, and all of Noguchi's future involvement in playground design was two-fold. First, *Playmountain* is an expression of specific ideas about play and childhood development. In the design, Noguchi suggests how a sculpted environment could provide educational and healthful activities; he later spoke extensively of the advantages primary forms for creative play. The back-to-the-drawing-board approach to playground design was also in line with an entire movement of thought centered on emphasizing the importance of play and recreations for children, particularly in urban centers such as New York City. Therefore, Noguchi's first experiment in playground design seems to have sprung from a pre-existing social interest in recreation and play. Second, and more significantly, *Playmountain* was only one part of the broad social project of art made for living that Noguchi had begun to develop in the early 1930s. Alongside his other remarkable landscape proposals of 1933, *Playmountain* served as a theory for art that could engage its audience on the direct level of physical interaction.

*Playmountain* was an ideological expression when it was first created; it was not made for any specific commission. Yet, to achieve its purpose, *Playmountain* needed to be realized, not just shown in the gallery settings in its model form. And having envisioned this work as ideally suited for an urban space in a city such as his adopted



home of New York, Noguchi approached the most appropriate public office for the idea: the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. His connection, Murdock Pemberton, art critic for *The New Yorker*, had met the sculptor in the early 1930s when Noguchi was making a living producing portrait heads. Pemberton's likeness was carved by Noguchi in 1931 (fig. 5), and in 1934 provided a link to the newly titled New York City Parks Commissioner, Robert Moses, to whom Pemberton introduced Noguchi and *Playmountain*.

Theoretically, the timing was excellent. Moses had just received the position of Commissioner, which newly unified the department's jurisdiction throughout the city's boroughs (previously divided into separate city offices for Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and the Bronx), and the expansion of playgrounds was to be a top priority of his tenure. Across the nation, the previous decades had seen a growing emphasis on building playgrounds in urban spaces, and New York, which had taken a major role in such development, would remain in the lead, rapidly expanding children's recreational spaces. Noguchi's own socially invested interest in designing playgrounds was no doubt inspired by the same societal concern for children's recreation which drove Moses to construct and build the largest number of playgrounds of one commissioner. Yet, despite the overlap of motive, Moses was not interested in Noguchi's *Playmountain*. The plan was, in a variety of ways, far from Moses's own conception of ideal children's play space. Noguchi recalled with bitterness having been laughed out of the office, and gradually envisioned a marked animosity directed from the famously stubborn Commissioner.<sup>9</sup>

Antagonism aside, the failure of the *Playmountain* proposal is decipherable when considering the position of the two men, as connected as they may have been by a seemingly common interest in children's playgrounds. Considering the work itself – an unusual presentation of abstracted, vaguely defined forms – as well as Noguchi's unconventional involvement in playground design, along with Robert Moses's personal method of urban playground design and development, it is less surprising that Noguchi was turned away.

Primarily, Noguchi's playground was a feat of innovation, and by no means conventional. The 1933 model, carved in plaster relief and later cast in bronze, is a conceptual space with no external equipment, formed entirely out of shaped earth. It is distinctly urban in approach: in an effort to expand the maximum playable space of a city lot, Noguchi proposed constructing a pyramid shape. It would provide multifunctional features on its exterior for climbing and community activities, also leaving the interior accessible for crawling and exploring. On one side the pyramid would be tiled as steps, with two sloping features, one steep for sliding and one shallow for sledding in the winter. During warm seasons, water would flow into a shallow pool on one side, and a band shell would be available for music performances across from the steps, which could double as seating.

It is not difficult to imagine how a parks commissioner, accustomed to manufacturer's plans and proposals, may have thought Noguchi's proposition impossible to engage. Even today, to the extent that Noguchi re-envisioned the shapes and features of a playground in *Playmountain*, the model can appear abstract and generally undistinguishable as a play space in its bronze form. It has been called "art deco" in

appearance; areas seem to provide no distinctly defined uses, only a few vague possibilities. Granted, this implies a beneficial diversity of functions in the realized work. Yet, with just this model, much of the understanding of *Playmountain* is based in Noguchi's own descriptions, which call out the step and slide features, water elements, possible interior spaces, and band shell. How exactly these would function was never defined through formal architectural plans. The model was ideologically formed much as Noguchi's formal sculpture, and not built to practically express function and real space.

Even so, Noguchi and Moses would seem to have met on their guiding interest: the development and improvement of playgrounds. *Playmountain* could certainly be understood as a reform-style experimentation with the notion of recreation. If it were well suited for any city in the United States, New York, with its historical interest in playground reform, would have been the best place to receive such a proposal. However, with Moses newly in office, Noguchi was slightly too late.

Park design and playground design had, indeed, recently undergone a revival of thought in New York. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city had seen the growth of a formal movement, "Reform Parks" – an idealistic method of thought sweeping the country that was the first to encourage recreation, particularly for urban children. Small-scale parks began to spring up with equipment catering to age groups, and play directors employed by the Parks Department to guide children through educational, structured, and gender-appropriate activities. Under Mayor Seth Low in 1902 (in office 1902-03) playgrounds had become the primary focus of the Manhattan Park Commissioner William R. Willcox. Such concerns would continue under the leadership of Manhattan Park Commissioner Charles B. Stover, co-founder of the reformist Outdoor Recreation

League. Alongside other densely growing urban areas such as Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, New York City's Parks Department was one of the most progressive in the country during the era of the Reform Park.<sup>10</sup>

A generation later, Noguchi's philosophy regarding progressive and experimental playgrounds seems to echo the sentiments of that era in his emphasis on educational play and conceptual return to the drawing board in design. He would suggest:

Children, I think, must view the world differently from adults, their awareness of its possibilities are more primary and attuned to their capacities. When the adult would imagine like a child he must project himself into seeing the world as a totally new experience. I like to think of playgrounds as a primer of shapes and functions; simple, mysterious, and evocative: thus educational. The child's world would be a beginning world, fresh and clear.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond practicality, Noguchi adopted the ideas of the Reform era in a philosophical sense, interested in the new and developing ideas in child psychology that emphasized the importance of understanding the child's world as separate from that of the adult. The sculptor, attuned to intricacies of shapes and functions, was, for Noguchi, best suited towards imagining this ideal child's world. In *Playmountain*, Noguchi attempted to re-conceptualize the play space as a sculptor and provide simplified shapes and functional elements. It was a utopian vision, and a task well suited for an artist searching for a new, more humanistic sculpture. This was a qualitative approach that would catch on more and more throughout Europe, and later in the U.S. after the 1930s and 1940s when playground aesthetics would undergo further reconsiderations.<sup>12</sup> However, at the time Noguchi presented *Playmountain* to Robert Moses, the city's prerogative was more quantitative. The execution of reform policies at the turn of the century had produced a

particular model of play that, by 1934, had culminated in a standardized playground model for the New York City Parks Department.

Moses's reaction to *Playmountain* was truly symptomatic of the Commissioner's program. And to best understand why, Noguchi's design should be compared to the type of playground that Moses endeavored to produce, standardize and spread by the hundreds across Manhattan and the boroughs. Moses's appointment as New York City Parks Commissioner in 1934 meant that the growth of Reform era playground design innovation in New York had come to an end. Content with the model established by Charles Stover and the Outdoor Recreation League at the turn of the century Moses turned the city's energies towards building, by regularizing design and improving methods of land acquisition. His own progressive sentiment was not to be found in design innovation, but in the unprecedented scope of production in building new playgrounds. With his landscape architect, Gilmore D. Clarke, Moses modeled his playgrounds on the 1903 Seward Park, a Reform era first in New York (fig. 6). Seward Park (at the intersection of East Broadway, Essex and Canal Streets) had been the first municipal playground in the country, and the city's first construction of a space dedicated solely towards recreation. It had inspired the design and construction of many of New York's earliest playgrounds, and under Moses, would continue to do so.<sup>13</sup>

Noguchi's *Playmountain*, although in the spirit of the Reform era's emphasis on education and recreation, was most predominantly an innovation of design. It would not have met the approval of a Parks Department while they remained geared towards systematized efficiency on a large scale. As a utilitarian work of art, under the descriptive title of playground, and today potentially understood as an earthwork or

environmental art, this was a type of art that the Parks Department had never implemented, certainly not in place of its rigorously developed play equipment. However, in spite of the discouraging reactions towards *Playmountain*, Noguchi would continue to design playgrounds throughout his career. Furthermore, would continue to make proposals to the New York City Parks Department over the next three decades. The ideas behind the design for *Playmountain* would remain primary in Noguchi's future garden, landscape and play designs. He would later describe the work as "purely instinctual," claiming, "*Playmountain* was the kernel out of which have grown all my ideas relating sculpture to the earth. It is also the progenitor of playgrounds as sculptural landscapes."<sup>14</sup>

#### THE EARLY PROJECTS: *PLAY EQUIPMENT* (1939)

Certainly, it is easy to see the influence of *Playmountain* in most of Noguchi's later playground designs. The innovative use of the earth itself as a mode of play, simply in shape in form, would be the basis of most of his other playgrounds for New York, with the exception of one: his next play project was comprised of sculpturally informed traditional equipments, rather than earth modulations. Noguchi's *Play Equipment* (1939, figs. 7a-d) branches from the same series of interests in producing sculpture for living, and an interest in creating work scaled to a child's world for learning and exploring. But rather than being monumental in scope, related to an interest in garden and landscape design, *Play Equipment* falls in line with Noguchi's industrial designs, which he began to develop in mass in the 1940s.<sup>15</sup> The abrupt change from his conceptual *Playmountain* to his production-scaled *Playground Equipment* may have been spurred by the former's recent dismissal due to its non-conventional format. Noguchi may have been searching

for a means to realistically contribute to Moses's agenda.

*Playground Equipment* was not, however, initially built for New York City. In 1939, Noguchi had traveled to Hawaii to arrange a 1940 exhibition at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, and to discuss a possible commission with the Dole Pineapple Company. Although the commission would not be arranged, it was in Hawaii that Noguchi met Honolulu's Park Commissioner Lester McCoy and architect Harry Bent of the Ala Moana Park System. Noguchi was asked to design a set of playground equipment for the park, which he began when he returned to New York later that month.

*Playground Equipment* is an early anomaly in Noguchi's career, considering the work's more subtle variations on largely traditional forms, including a slide, swings, seesaw, and jungle gym. Later in his career, when Noguchi would return to creating play equipment sculptures designed for manufacture, he would generally work with more untraditional forms, relating the play pieces to large, abstract sculptures fit for climbing and crawling (figs. 8, 9). But at this early point, Noguchi was more openly catering his production to his commissions; he would recall his willingness to produce anything that was sought in open competitions, or private requests.<sup>16</sup> By 1939 he had executed two successful public projects, including his massive sculptural mural, *History of Mexico*, (1936, fig. 10) in Mexico City, and his *Chassis Fountain*, (1938, fig. 11) for Ford at the at the 1938 World's Fair. He had also just been awarded the commission for the *Associated Press Building Plaque* (1939-40, fig. 12). These early works are also atypical of Noguchi's later, more developed public projects. The figurative elements in his *History of Mexico*, and *Associated Press Building Plaque* would disappear in his work during the 1940s, much like conventional equipment would disappear in his later playgrounds.

Yet, Noguchi found the redesign of traditional play equipment to be an opportunity to use sculpture to explore and toy with the educational functions of these pieces. When the equipment was featured in *Architectural Digest* in 1940, he described the work's learning value in detail:

A multiple length swing teaches that the rate of swing is determined by the length of the pendulum not by its weight or width of arc... The spiral slide will develop instinct regarding the bank necessary to overcome the centrifugal force developed by the rate of the slide. The climbing plaything supplies a variety of climbable forms and textures: upright rungs, corrugated post, a series of rings to climb in and out of, a series of beads like oversize fishnet buoys and a rope with a ball on the end.<sup>17</sup>

And unlike the vague and conceptually abstracted *Playmountain*, with *Playground Equipment*, Noguchi took the opportunity to explore the practical construction of the equipment. The swing set was to be made of pipe and scaffolding joints. The slide, constructed in cantilever balance, offered possibilities: it could make it of steel sheet or wood. He proposed, "it could also be built of a number of other mediums such as cupric magnesium oxide covered with latex or cement with ship cement surfacing and if a weather resistant plastic could be found, that would be wonderful." The seesaw would be height adjustable, as would the basketball stop, with a moveable counterweight to keep it in place while at the same time minimizing weight of construction.<sup>18</sup> These statements on construction and educational value, unavailable for many of Noguchi's other playground proposals, lend an understanding to what he may have imagined of other spaces.

With this new level of preparedness, Noguchi would return to the New York City Parks Department with his set of three- to five-inch models. The commission in Hawaii had fallen through, and the designs must have seemed to be far more in line with Moses's



idea for efficient, standardized play equipment.<sup>19</sup> However, if Noguchi had expected a more welcoming reaction from the Parks Department than he had received for the non-traditional *Playmountain*, he may have been surprised to be turned away again. James V. Mulholland, New York City Park Department Director of Recreation, informed Noguchi that the main concern of the city was safety, and any untested equipment, such as Noguchi's models, had the potential to be dangerous. The department was, again, uninterested.

#### THE EARLY PROJECTS: *CONTOURED PLAYGROUND* (1941)

Yet, these words of warning would only serve to challenge Noguchi and his early ambition. He would state, "I felt obliged to answer all the dire warning of the danger to which I would expose small children with my play equipment."<sup>20</sup> As if to underscore the missed potential of his first proposal, *Playmountain*, Noguchi would construct his *Contoured Playground* (1941, figs. 13a, 13b), with which he returned to the Robert Moses offices for a third time in early 1941. The model was built to stubbornly respond directly to the previous criticism as Noguchi perceived the surface, made entirely of soft earth modulations, to serve as proof against any serious accidents.<sup>21</sup>

Creatively, *Contoured Playground* was to be a conceptual reinforcement of Noguchi's idea that play could be effectively, healthfully, and now safely derived from sculptural earth forms. Similar to the conceptual basis of *Playmountain*, *Contoured Playground* would mold the ground surface, but break into smaller and more frequent earth mounds and crawl spaces. The layout would consist of separate climbing and sliding features, and in this sense would be more traditional to the function of play

spaces, with separated areas of interested. Like *Playmountain*, this was a rough proposal carved into a plaster slab with a purely abstract sense of function and scale; no record exists of specific functions, and no architectural plans were made. Noguchi described the space's potential, and loosely suggested that water could flow in the summer months.<sup>22</sup>

Mulholland again reviewed Noguchi's project, and was this time less dismissive of the idea, at one point suggesting that the design could potentially work in Central Park. It was taken into consideration in January.<sup>23</sup> However, timing was at least the primary issue to blame for eventually ending the department's interest in *Contoured Playground*. With the threat of war looming, city construction was experiencing drastic cutbacks. The outbreak of the World War II that December would halt public construction in New York and across the country, and the New York City Parks Department would not resume its healthy construction pace until around 1946.

Throughout his career, Noguchi continuously referenced the animosity of the Parks Department towards his proposals. Robert Moses, in his capacity as head of the department, would come to bear the grunt of Noguchi's frustration, regardless of who had directly affected a project's disapproval. Certainly, Noguchi was not alone in his dislike of Moses, a stubborn, yet efficient man whose career would span the terms of five mayors and six governors, and who would later inspire city-wide criticism for his narrowly conceived methods of accomplishing development in New York.<sup>24</sup> The current perception of Moses as a historical figure has increasingly leaned towards criticism as well, making it easy to accept Noguchi's perspective of Moses as the single person responsible for the failure of his playground proposals in New York. Yet, although the antagonism is plain to see on Noguchi's side, Moses's own position towards the sculptor

is not so easy to reduce to the hatred Noguchi would claim. Furthermore, to suggest that these projects were turned down by a single verdict predicated in an illusory vendetta is to ignore several other factors, including problems with the work itself, problems with time and money, and issues caused by other individuals involved.

The relative lack of information on these three early projects makes it less easy to entirely clarify who, why, and what contributed to their failure. But it is both clear and inferable in each proposal that there were many other factors which made the works unbuildable at the time, and undesirable for the Parks Department: *Playmountain's* monumentally, *Play Equipment's* untested designs and production independent of manufacturing companies, and *Contoured Playground's* timing. Additionally, whether overt or not, these were works of art: a conceptual piece of Noguchi's philosophy, and, to the city, the work of a young, un-established sculptor. The Parks Department was not in the position during this time period to take such risks, which have not been acknowledged as factors in these designs. Newness, untested innovative designing, and the employment of a sculptor to create public city spaces were ideas all beyond the prerogative of the Parks Department, and Moses was above all interested in maintaining a larger agenda of efficiency.

#### THE UNITED NATIONS PLAYGROUND (1951)

*Contoured Playground* was the last of Noguchi's independently proposed playgrounds to the Parks Department. In the early 1950s, he received his first commissioned opportunity to design a children's play space. This project, linked to the immense city construction of the United Nations Building, coincided with a significant

growth in Noguchi's career. This project and the last playground that Noguchi designed for New York both are surrounded by an ever more complex history, involving different levels of support and preparation, and naturally, even more complicated reasons for the project's eventual failure.

After *Contoured Playground* Noguchi began to work more closely with the idea of sculpting the earth. The original idea from *Playmountain* would begin to affect a variety of works, some even more unbuildable, and some, eventually, incorporated into actualized commissions. During and following the war, a series of large-scale earthworks would express some of Noguchi's most dramatic ideas. His *This Tortured Earth* (1943, fig. 14) appears to be a further abstraction of earth modulations – in some sense it could be seen as an even less traditional playground.<sup>25</sup> *This Tortured Earth*, with its visceral tears in the surface of the sculpture, was to be constructed using aerial bombardment to sculpt the earth's surface, although never formally proposed for a specific location. Also, *Sculpture to Be Seen From Mars* (1947, fig. 15) proposed an abstracted face, dug and sculpted in the ground in a remote location, on a monumental scale. Without concern for ever reasonably realizing these works, Noguchi's imaginative impulses created these landscape proposals as extensions of the ideas expressed in his early playgrounds and earthworks.

But Noguchi's progressive aspirations depended on seeing his work become a useful part of living. All the while he continued to propose and seek commissions, and by the end of the 1940s, Noguchi would begin two important public works. Brought about through his work with lighted sculpture, or "lunars," in 1947 Noguchi designed a surrealist inspired ceiling for the Time and Life Building (destroyed, fig. 16). In 1948 he

designed the ceiling for the American Stove Company Building in St. Louis, Missouri (fig. 17). Spurred on by such successes, he would continue to be courted by private companies to create interior spaces, furniture, and environments as his sculptural work, too, gained more recognition. Noguchi would return to playgrounds, and New York, at the beginning of the next decade when he received his first commission of the kind to design an innovative play space for the recently begun United Nations building site.

Up to that point, the UN had been involved in a lengthy technical process of establishing a permanent location since its founding.<sup>26</sup> Early in 1946, the UN General Assembly meeting in London finally had decided to locate in the United States, and began collecting information on a variety of locations, ranging dramatically in size and place, from suburban, to urban, to rural. New York City received an early leg up on the competition. As City Construction Coordinator in conjunction with a variety of other titles, Robert Moses began to encourage the UN to accept the 1939 World's Fair site in Flushing Meadows Queens. In March, the UN accepted the location for its temporary headquarters, pending final selection. Moses was to play a large role in the courting of the UN on behalf of the City of New York, primarily for the Flushing Meadows site, but eventually it was two members of his Flushing Meadows development committee who would secure the actual location. Nelson Rockefeller and architect Wallace K. Harrison had learned that Secretary General Trygve Lie favored New York for a permanent location, but only within Manhattan. At the last minute an ideal location became available: Harrison had been working with developer William Zeckendorf to build "X City," a complex intended to rival Rockefeller Center in a former slaughterhouse district from 42<sup>nd</sup> to 48<sup>th</sup> Streets between 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and Roosevelt Drive. Zeckendorf had

stalled on the project due to financial difficulties. Through negotiations, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. offered to purchase the property to donate to the UN for its building – an \$8.5 million proposition that was too costly for the city government. The UN accepted on December 14, 1946.<sup>27</sup>

From early 1947, Moses's role was that of leading the City Planning Commission to develop the surrounding areas. He also had been appointed as liaison between the city and the UN, responsible for coordinating the city's contributions to the construction. Much of the contributions were made in the form of massive neighborhood improvement schemes; Moses oversaw the passing of zoning legislation and tax exemption, as well as the condemnation of buildings and alterations of streets.<sup>28</sup> Construction began in October of 1949.

The idea to construct a playground on the site, was, in fact, Moses's. Despite the UN's extraterritoriality, Moses was heavily involved with the landscaping of the site. Furthermore, Moses had an established habit of building playgrounds in conjunction with virtually all public work, including those outside the reach of the Parks Department. 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.<sup>29</sup>

Within the UN's new property, the northern section was to be largely devoted to green space and walkways. Plans for a delegation office building in the area had recently been set aside, and in December of 1949, the press caught wind of Moses's request that one acre of the seventeen acre site be set aside in the northeast section for use by

neighborhood children.<sup>30</sup> However, Secretary General Trygve Lie was not eager to bend to Moses's suggestions. He commented, "I have great admiration for my friend, Bob Moses, but if he sees a little bit of land in Manhattan or in the other boroughs, he wants it at once for playgrounds and swimming pools [...] I understand him [...] However, I do not think there will be any swimming pool or playground on the site of the United Nations."<sup>31</sup> It was suggested that Lie would find it hard to accept Moses's idea without "embarrassing the unique and privileged status enjoyed by the United Nations on its own immune territory."<sup>32</sup>

However, in the spring of 1951 Lie bent to Moses's persuasion. Moses, in his capacity as both City Coordinator of Planning and Construction and Parks Commissioner, had rallied the support of the UN's chief architect, Wallace K. Harrison, and City Mayor Vincent Impellitteri (in office August 1950 – December 1953). Lie announced that the sixteen-nation Headquarters Advisory Committee had been alerted to the plans and had raised no objections.<sup>33</sup> Shortly thereafter, the annexation of land for the playground was approved by the General Assembly. From the outset it was announced that the construction costs would be borne by the United Nation, making the playground entirely under the jurisdiction of the UN from start to finish.

The news was quickly picked up by a local community member, Audrey Hess, who lived only one block north from the proposed playground area on Beekman Place at 50<sup>th</sup> Street between 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and the FDR Drive. Hess's interest in the playground combined two aspects of her life: scion of a family of philanthropists and married to *ARTNews* editor Thomas B. Hess, Audrey Hess was an active committee member of the Citizens Committee for Children, and dedicated her time to fundraising for similar

causes, and the arts.<sup>34</sup> When the proposal for a playground was announced, Hess was joined by her aunt, Adele Rosenwald Levy, and the wife of John D. Rockefeller, III, Blanchette H. Rockefeller, to aid in the effort and direct the outcome.

The three women, led by Hess, saw the playground as a “chance to develop a unique contribution to the fields of recreation and design.”<sup>35</sup> They also related the project to the progressive spirit of the UN. Noguchi would recall, “It was proposed that the spirit of idealism and good will engendered by the UN should be matched with a new and more imaginative playground for the small children of the delegates and of the neighborhood.”<sup>36</sup> Rockefeller, connected through both her brother-in-law and father-in-law to Harrison, was able to speak with him about the project in April. Harrison had been appointed the Chief Architect and Director of Planning for the United Nation’s Permanent Headquarters in January 1947. He was enthusiastic about the idea, and referred the group to his associate, Glenn Bennett.

In the meantime, Hess had elicited the participation of Noguchi. As an active patron of the arts, she would have been familiar with Noguchi and his public work, and would claim to have chosen him based on his “original conceptions.” Architect Julian Whittlesey of Mayer & Whittlesey was also asked to join the project, based on his “understanding of the special considerations requisite in designing effective play areas for small children.”<sup>37</sup>

Noguchi was not the only one sensitive to Moses’s stubbornness regarding playgrounds. Audrey Hess was well aware that the project had been proposed by Moses, and that even though the UN territory resided out of his purview, it was possible that he would intercede on matters of design. Her first task was to confirm Moses’s absence



from the project. Noguchi was in Japan to secure a commission to design his *Hiroshima Bridges* (1951-52 figs. 18a, 18b), while Hess and Whittlesey met with Bennett. Hess stated that the group wished to know the position of Moses in the project. If he were involved in any way, the offer would be withdrawn immediately.<sup>38</sup> Presumably, Hess was aware of Moses's practice implementing traditional, structurally efficient playgrounds reminiscent of the 1903 Seward Park. She also possibly was influenced by Noguchi's own soured experience, which he framed as generally caused by Moses. But Bennett reassured Hess and Whittlesey that this would not be the case, and that the playground did not fall under the jurisdiction of municipal departments, either in respect to design or operation. For matters of design, the playground would fall directly under the supervision of Harrison and Bennett who were coordinating all design efforts for the headquarters. Hess wrote to Bennett on May 4, 1951 to formalize the offer; she named Noguchi and Whittlesey as designers, and offered to raise funds for the project's completion. Bennett replied that he was looking forward to the plans.<sup>39</sup>

Noguchi had been working on the design during his travels. His completed plaster model, finished in the summer of 1951, was a significant incorporation and development of his previous ideas (figs. 19a-c). Whereas *Playmountain* and *Contoured Playground* adjusted features of the land and created naturally inspired hills and crawl spaces, Noguchi's playground for the United Nations did the same, with the added effects of sculptural equipment, though entirely unconventional. While his *Playground Equipment* had varied familiar themes of slides and swings, the new structures were built for free climbing and crawling to foster imaginative development. This model was built to be a "rough sketch," incorporating a variety of ideas to show a diverse set of solutions. The

growing signature of his envisioned playscapes was there: again that the ground itself could provide shapes and areas for creative play. This time, however, with a second layer of added sculptural elements formed of wire, and Noguchi made use of the flat, square area to focus on shapes and structures. The mounds that were present in *Countered Playground* were given the usefulness of the larger *Playmountain*. In one corner, two hills had been hollowed out for climbing through, and in the corner across, a wider mound had been cut with ridges for climbing and sliding. A group of triangular steps in the center would become a signature element of Noguchi's future playgrounds, referred to as a "step pyramid," tentatively brightly colored, and formed to derive exercise from jumping and climbing.

As a "sketch model," Noguchi's work was presented to Bennett and members of the UN Planning Commission on August 7, 1951. Again, the question of interference by the city was raised, and the Commission made clear that as long as Wallace Harrison in his capacity as director and Secretary General Trygve Lie had approved of the plans, Moses would have no say in the matter. With the approval of the Commission, and preliminary approval from Harrison, Hess wrote directly to Lie to formally solicit his support. Proposing that her group incorporate under the name United Nations Playground Association, Hess described their aims as securing a children's playground of "outstanding design." She wrote:

We have in mind a playground design which is stimulating to children's imagination and conducive to the freedom and variety of their play, which at the same time meeting the various criteria as to safety, maintenance, sanitation, and comfort. The playground is to be beautiful in form, color and planting; its equipment and accessories also beautiful, in addition to being well designed for the purposes. A playground meeting these objectives is befitting the UN and the forward looking standards which it

sets. As such, this playground should signalize to children what the UN stands for.<sup>40</sup>

Hess's group was prepared to raise between \$50-75,000 dollars to cover the cost of design and construction, and proposed to Lie that there be no reference to any city departments or authorities on the matter of design or operation of the playground.

However, the group's idealistic aims for developing a playground to relate so dramatically to the "forward-looking standards" of the UN, was perhaps too grand in scale for a project that Lie had resisted from the outset. When he had agreed to offer a portion of the property for the development of a playground, it was upon Moses's insistence. In Lie's view, the playground was a small gift back to city for all of the property, regional development and assistance donated, estimated at \$25,000,000. Moses had been quick to remind Lie and the UN Planning Commission continually of these contributions, and even had accused the UN of a "failure to cooperate and proceed with its part of the landscaping and joint construction incorporated in an agreement made in 1947."<sup>41</sup> With the playground development now agreed to, excluding Moses from the project would be impossible. 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, since it is not to be very large and will be an integral part of our landscaping."<sup>42</sup> Gilmore Clarke, who had been handling the UN property landscaping on behalf of Robert Moses, just recently had consulted with the City Parks Department and developed a design for the playground.

Hess, however, would not accept this refusal lightly. Immediately following the news, she was able to enlist the help of the Museum of Modern Art, which decided on October 4<sup>th</sup> to show the model and other works by both men the following January 1952.

Two days later, the news reached the press. The *New York Times* reported that, upon seeing the model, Moses had stated, “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.”<sup>43</sup>

Noguchi, who had had little success in dealing with the Parks Department in the past, was baffled by the ability of the Parks Commissioner to extend his reach in areas beyond his jurisdiction. This event, in particular, would solidify Noguchi’s view that his past lack of success was due most directly to an antagonism Moses felt for him. Noguchi would accuse Moses of derailing the well supported project, and disregard Lie’s role in the matter. He would write,

That Robert Moses was so opposed to [the model] should not have been the surprise that it was; I thought that this time he would not be concerned, because of United Nations extraterritoriality. I had underestimated him [...] Eventually the United Nations had to submit to Moses who I understand threatened not to install the guard rail facing the East River.<sup>44</sup>

By that point, the UN was no stranger to Moses’s threats, though its decision was certainly more complicated than Noguchi suggested. Moses, frustrated with all aspects of the UN cooperation in development, had at least once threatened to resign from the joint city-United Nations committee, tired of the UN dragging their feet on projects. He complained, “I even had to get the city to appropriate \$100,000 for the obviously essential fence for the site.”<sup>45</sup> Lie had written to Moses on October 2<sup>nd</sup> to assure him that the General Assembly would be asked for necessary funds, and mentioned that, as for the playground, “the decisions taken earlier [for Gilmore Clark’s plans] still stand.”<sup>46</sup>

Noguchi’s model, along with Whittlesey’s drawings, was put on display at MoMA slightly later than planned, in March 1952. The exhibition was a remarkable

success, providing both encouraging reviews of the model and architect's drawings, as well as reflections on the benefit of experimental playgrounds, and the out-datedness of Robert Moses's methods. For the first time, Noguchi's growing vocabulary for constructing play sculpture received a public platform. Prior to the MoMA show, *Playmountain* and *Contoured Playground* had been included in a handful of gallery exhibitions, but without the direct focus on their social role as sculptures for play.

The MoMA exhibition is significant in that it is the first event to verify the appropriate intersection of art and designs for play. MoMA had become a leading institution in the 1950s for the promotion of artful industrial design; this exhibition would have fit along with such trends. The presentation of Noguchi's model provided the opportunity for pondering how sculpture, specifically a sculpturally informed environment, may benefit the field of playground design. The work was described at the exhibition, significantly, as "architectural sculpture."<sup>47</sup> This was practically the first time Noguchi's playgrounds were understood to be clearly and beneficially sculpture, alongside their functionality, whereas previously, the significance of his participation in such design was generally under-appreciated. Privately, in the realm of museums the notion of functional, environmental artwork was beginning to gain credibility in the 1950s, although this would not help Noguchi's playgrounds in the public sphere for several decades.

This exhibition also marked the intersection of a new public interest in playground design. *ARTNews* editor Thomas Hess, from his biased position as Audrey Hess's husband, would write a glowing review of the show, which reflected the growing

interest in the idea of progressive play, and the souring sentiment towards the Moses method. He reported:

Tucked away this spring with a didactic exhibition [...] is a plaster model and some architect's plans of what might have been one of the most important integrations of modern art with daily life in recent years [...] The playground was killed by ukase from a municipal official who is supposed to run the parks in New York, and who somehow is the city's self-appointed guardian against any art forms except bankers'-special Neo-Georgian.<sup>48</sup>

In fact, Robert Moses and his particular style of Reform Era playground was newly subjected to skepticism from many fronts. On one side, it was an aesthetic exhaustion, brought on by years of the Seward Park model playground proliferating across the city; on the other side, the questioning was a complete reanalysis of the Moses standard playground in a neo-progressive look at potential benefits for children in providing “arty” play equipment. Audrey Hess’s idealistic approach to the UN project, as highlighted in her descriptions to Lie and Harrison, are symptomatic of such changes.

Additionally, a *New York Times* article in April 1952 was thorough enough to examine the potential need for new thinking in children’s spaces. In the article, Moses’s equipment was praised in part for its efficiency and safety, but the *Times* suggested subtly, “perhaps they could do more.” It was added that, “childhood is a time for developing muscles and physical coordination, it’s true, 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.”<sup>49</sup> Moses’s unflinching dedication to his turn of the century progressive model would remain throughout his tenure, but would provoke even more aggressive criticism from recreation experts following his retirement in the 1960s.

Over the later half of the 1950s, Audrey Hess remained a force behind the UN playground model, as she continued to promote Noguchi's design and vowed to see it realized. For Hess, the progressive cause suited her interest in the arts and paired this interest with her devotion to working for children's charities. However, after four failed proposals for playgrounds in Manhattan, Noguchi's own interest was waning. His desire to realize a sculptural playground was only one part of the broader interest in the creation of large-scale sculptural environments or earthworks, which, for Noguchi, increasingly took the form of anything from playgrounds to memorial spaces to gardens. It was therefore easy for Noguchi to leave Hess and her ambitions for finding a new site for the UN playground; he instead would turn his focus towards areas where he was receiving more success and praise.

The public sphere in particular had proven difficult time and time again for the realization of public play spaces. But beginning in the early 1950s, Noguchi would find a series of private organizations interested in his innovative garden designs. The first of these projects began in Japan, around the same time Noguchi was asked to design the *United Nations Playground*, and contributed to his frequent absences during the project. Noguchi collaborated with architect Yoshiro Taniguchi in designing the new faculty room and garden at Keio University. *Shin Banraisha*, (1951-52, destroyed, figs. 20a, 20b) was designed as a memorial space to Noguchi's estranged father, who had taught at the university for many years, and had only recently passed away. Noguchi constructed a series of sculptural elements to be placed in a landscaped garden, and designed the interior with custom furniture. Around the same time, the Readers Digest Building in Tokyo commissioned Noguchi to design a new garden and fountain, (1951, fig. 21).

By the mid-1950s Noguchi began to receive more frequent commissions. In collaboration with architects Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Noguchi was asked to design a garden for the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company in Bloomfield, Connecticut, (1956-57, figs. 22a, 22b). The same year, he designed his seminal work, the garden for UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, (1956-58, fig. 23), with architect Marcel Breuer. And by the 1960s, Noguchi found himself in high demand for precisely what he had envisioned in 1933: the sculpture of spaces for everyday life.

All things considered, it is not surprising that Noguchi would later reflect his disappointment when Hess contacted him in 1960 for a new playground project. The time had passed, his creative desires were relatively satisfied, his track record with the New York City Parks Department was consistently poor, and he was very busy. Between 1960 and 1961, Noguchi would be asked to design four other gardens: the First National City Bank Plaza in Fort Worth, Texas, (1960-61, fig. 24); The Sunken Garden for the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, (1960-64, fig. 25); the 5-acre Billy Rose Sculpture Garden at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, (1960-65, fig. 26); and the Sunken Garden for Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza, (1961-64, fig. 27). But Hess, who had not stopped campaigning for the realization of Noguchi's UN playground design, had found an interested group in Manhattan's Upper West Side.

#### *THE RIVERSIDE PARK PLAYGROUND (1961-66)*

Riverside Park, located along the Hudson River between 72<sup>nd</sup> and 158<sup>th</sup> Streets, was originally designed by Fredrick Law Olmsted in 1875, but by 1960 it had fallen into disrepair in several pocket locations along the 4-mile stretch. In August 1960, a group of



Upper West Side community organizations focused their attention on a forgotten 1930s Moses-era playground between the West Side Highway and 103<sup>rd</sup> street. Police patrol was stepped up, and a free summer day camp attracted a diverse group of children from surrounding communities.<sup>50</sup> The success of this revitalization prompted several of the groups involved to begin campaigning for more permanent improvements to the old facilities.

Hess would recall that she had been approached by several people connected with the Bloomingdale Conservation Project, the group which had headed the initial revitalization of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Street playground. This body also included representatives from the New York City Health Department, the United Neighborhood Houses (UNH), and the City Planning Commission, all of whom were interested in expanding the existing play space to 101<sup>st</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> Streets. According to Hess, they remembered the plan for the United Nations, which Hess had had a heavy hand in promoting, and requested that she ask Noguchi to participate.<sup>51</sup> By the time Noguchi was contacted in October, the Parks Department under the new leadership of Newbold Morris (in office May 1960 – January 1966), had expressed interest in the plans and in Noguchi's involvement; Bloomingdale and the UNH had presented photos of Noguchi's UN model and other projects to the department as an example of the type of playground desired. Hess was well-aware of Noguchi's feeling for the Parks Department, and when she wrote to describe the new project, she was quick to mention their support and change in staff. She wrote optimistically, "as Moses is out, I do not contemplate all the difficulties we ran into before – Mr. Morris is really very excited with the idea," and "the effort has his wholehearted interest and almost certain approval."<sup>52</sup>

Reflecting back on the project in his autobiography published eight years later, Noguchi would recall the news with disappointment:

The idea of playgrounds as a 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? I found myself getting involuntarily involved in the design [...] It was as if I was no longer free to choose – the work chose me.<sup>53</sup>

Regardless, he would accept based on two factors: the absence of Robert Moses, and the idea, made clear from the outset, that this could be a collaborative effort. Bloomingdale, the leading group, and the UNH, Bloomingdale's agency in charge of finances, were looking for both a playground and a series of facilities for programs like the 1960 summer day camp, and perhaps new year-round programs. In her letter to Noguchi requesting his participation, Hess indicated that the sculptor could opt to design the entire space, or only part.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, it was to become quickly clear that an architect and possibly an engineer would be asked to participate.<sup>55</sup> Noguchi accepted and in December 1960 visited the proposed site to prepare for the project.

The plan was slow moving from the start. Hope had been expressed that Noguchi could produce a design by summer 1961, but by June the search for an architect was still underway. Hess, recognizing that the scope of the project would, indeed, necessitate the participation of an architect, had asked Frank Caplan of Creative Playthings to recommend one.<sup>56</sup> Caplan had been rallying architects, sculptors, and designers since the early 1950s to contribute to his company's board of consultants, and would have been someone quite familiar with the persons available and interested at the time. It is not entirely clear, however, who finally chose Louis Kahn (1901-1974). Noguchi would

mention several times following the collaboration that both the decision to include an architect, and the choice of Kahn was his idea.<sup>57</sup>

In retrospect, Kahn was an interesting choice for the project. His own record for realized projects was hardly any better than Noguchi's, and his experience with playground design was even more limited. He had designed the Memorial Playground at the Western Home for Children in Philadelphia (1946), and had briefly expressed interest in playground design in 1954.<sup>58</sup> Noguchi would later comment that perhaps if Philip Johnson - another choice for the project - had joined the effort, the project may have had a better chance of being realized.<sup>59</sup> However, the collaboration would have its remarkable benefits as well, fostering a productive friendship, and producing a stunning series of both men's most unusual and innovative unrealized designs.

Noguchi was confident about his contribution. In an early letter to Kahn he outlined each of their roles:

I suppose my main task will be the general play landscape and furniture [...] These must reflect the characteristics of the main structures, which make it doubly important to start out right. To be merely fancy or 'freeform' is of course not enough, though it must have a definite appeal to children. What to do and what not to do is a challenge.<sup>60</sup>

He was generally correct in his assumption. Towards the end of the project, a certain division of labor had been established, and much of Noguchi's contributions were to the changing play structures made from earth modulations and freeform sculpture, while Kahn focused on structural concerns regarding subterranean playrooms and community centers.

While Noguchi, Hess, and Caplan had been searching for the project's architect, Bloomingdale and the UNH had organized community meetings in June to discuss the

redevelopment and determine priorities with residents, parents and children's associations, and local groups. Noguchi and Kahn used these suggestions to build their first proposal in the fall of 1961. The first version, the most ambitious of the schemes, extended throughout the whole of the available land for the park from West 101<sup>st</sup> to 105<sup>th</sup> Streets. Not only was this to be Noguchi's largest playground design, but also one of his largest project to date, although over the course of the project, the designated area would shrink from three blocks to one (down to West 102<sup>nd</sup> to 103<sup>rd</sup>, or West 103<sup>rd</sup> to 104<sup>th</sup>).

There were other new challenges presented as well. Compared to his previous playgrounds, Riverside provided the most complicated arrangement of topography, which necessitated adapting the scheme to the existing space, rather than proposing a complete re-arrangement of the earth as in *Playmountain*, *Contoured Playground*, or ignoring the topography in favor of developing "sketch" ideas as in the *United Nations Playground*. Three elevations levels had to be incorporated or considered: one level with Riverside Drive on the east border of the site; an esplanade over the subterranean tracts of the New York Central Railroad; and a steep slope down towards the West Side Highway, the western border of the site.

Noguchi and Kahn's first model would take advantage of the land's variations (figs. 28a, 28b). There were four dominant elements including, from the north, a semi-circular mazelike sand garden or play area; an underground nursery, accessible from Riverside Drive with a cup-like sun trap at ground level; an amphitheater with triangular play-steps similar to those used in the UN model; and a slide mountain with triangular slides and circular seats, surrounded at the bottom with various concrete play elements, some similar to the UN model. In the first version of the model, existing land in the west

along the West Side Highway was adapted to hold a skating rink and swimming pool, although the elements were removed from the larger, more formalized version of the scheme towards the end of 1961. All of these elements would have reflected the concerns of the community, and certainly the needs expressed by the leading community organizations. The organizers had described to Hess from the beginning their desire to see all age groups considered, with an outdoor arena for concerts to be held.<sup>61</sup>

However, it is apparent that the community organizations' concerns were interpreted differently by each party, and from the outset this would be a primary source of much of the project's difficulties over the five-year period. Shortly after Noguchi and Kahn had presented their formalized model and drawings to the Parks Department in early January of 1962 (figs. 29a, 29b), Commissioner Morris responded to the UNH with a letter expressing his office's strong disapproval. Morris wrote,

When the leaders of the Bloomingdale project first came to see me more than a year ago, they made the very valid suggestion, with which I agreed, that an area of Riverside Park close to the level of Riverside Drive be developed for neighborhood use by mothers and small children to avoid the long walk and the steep grades to and from the lower level of the Park. Then Messrs. Kahn and Noguchi entered the picture and permitted their talented imagination to soar with the result that we were presented with the design for an unjustifiable architectural monument.<sup>62</sup>

Morris had a series of complaints, not the least of which was the suggestion the Noguchi and Kahn's involvement would draw crowds of the "avant-garde" personalities still flocking to the recently opened Guggenheim Museum. More importantly the cost of this grandiose plan, Morris suggested, was vastly underestimated, and even Kahn's certainly inaccurate estimate was beyond the Park Department's budget. Morris pointed out that something of this scale and cost – likely to run upwards of \$1 million – was beyond reason for a local community revitalization, and was more on scale with a borough-wide

project, for which there was no need. He was quick to point out other elements which he would have expected to see in a project of this size, such as an outdoor swimming pool or an ice skating rink which would be beneficial city-wide, although, he maintained, unnecessary in the neighborhood considering surrounding facilities.

Morris suggested that Bloomingdale and the UNH return to their original thinking, along more modest lines. This would imply removing Kahn and Noguchi from the project. They had yet to sign a contract. Yet, with Hess's continued involvement, this would not be the case. The solution she presented to Morris in May was that the playground redevelopment continue as a memorial to Adele Rosenwald Levy, philanthropist, community activist, and Hess's aunt, who had recently passed away in 1960.<sup>63</sup> Levy had been one of the three women raising funds for Noguchi's *United Nations Playground* in 1951. As a founder of the Citizens Committee for Children she was an advocate for children's groups citywide. Therefore, a Noguchi playground and community center would be a fitting memorial.

Hess offered, on behalf of the friends and family of the late Adele Levy, to raise \$500,000, half of the project's cost, towards the realization of the Kahn/Noguchi model, contingent on the city providing matching funds for construction, and a contract with the advisory committee and designers. Morris responded later that week with his preliminary acceptance.

By September 1962, meetings for the contract were held and a timeline was set, estimating construction to begin in a year and a half, in April 1964. The model that Noguchi and Kahn had presented early in 1962 had changed only slightly over the year – they considered their work an initial design up for further development, and had spent

most of their time addressing construction problems associated with the underground rooms. By September, they issued a statement that outlined the playground's purpose and elements: "The purpose of the Adele Levy Memorial Playground is to establish an area for familiar relaxation and play rather than an area for any specific sport. We have attempted to supply a landscape where children of all ages, their parents, grandparents and other older people can mutually find enjoyment."<sup>64</sup> Play elements were described as concrete with integral colors. And, in October, the project first appeared in the press. The *New York Times* reported that Mayor Wagner had backed the project from its inception, and that Commissioner Morris had recently accepted the plans, and was expected to present them to the Board of Estimate for approval.<sup>65</sup> An illustration showed the inclusion of two previously removed elements: a skating rink and a swimming pool located at the lower southwest corner of the site at the West Side Highway. These may have been re-added to satisfy Morris's comments in his initial letter of disapproval (fig. 30).<sup>66</sup>

With the Parks Department prepared to move fast along schedule with the project, Noguchi and Kahn received several requests for detailed draws and specifications following the submission to the Board of Estimate in preparation for a December meeting of the Art Commission of the City of New York. But when Parks Department Executive Officer John Mulcahy requested a color plan or model for the meeting, Kahn seemed surprised. Calling the request "premature," Kahn explained to Mulcahy that the model as it existed was merely a "pre-preliminary" idea, or sketch for the approval of the planning organizations involved.<sup>67</sup> The artist and the architect felt that their work hardly was prepared for final approval.

Regardless of these statements, the model went before the Art Commission on December 10, 1962. The project was not approved, and upon their own request, Kahn and Noguchi were given a list of problems to address: the plans were too vague and must be accompanied by not only better descriptions, but also Kahn and Noguchi themselves, who, both busy with projects abroad, had not attended the Art Commission meeting.<sup>68</sup> The Parks Department also had a list of grievances: they insisted that there were problems with lighting the lower levels and rooms, and requested that the sand garden be removed, as it was considered “impractical” for New York City children. More information was requested on Noguchi’s play structures for their safety to be determined, and the designers were notified that if the project failed to meet the Art Commission’s approval the second time, it would be ended.<sup>69</sup>

The problems securing the approval of both the Art Commission and the Parks Department shortly would become only one part of the project’s impediments. While developing a second version in February of 1963, a group of nearby residents, believing that open park space would be tragically lost to the construction of these concrete structures, formed the Riverside Parks and Playgrounds Committee, aimed at stopping the playground by initializing legal action. In June, they obtained a State Supreme Court order permitting access to the Parks Department files on the Riverside Playground plans. The group would charge that the plan was being “railroaded through” and would use Morris’s first letter of disapproval in February 1962 as proof, where he had called the proposal “too grandiose.”<sup>70</sup>

Yet, despite the developing problems, 1963 was a productive year for the Kahn/Noguchi collaboration. Noguchi would recall Kahn’s enthusiasm in spite of



constant requests for revisions, and Kahn's never-waning interest in solving new problems by applying his ever-changing influences to each solution. This working strategy would become problematic as well. Noguchi wrote after Kahn's death in 1975:

[Kahn] followed his changing fascinations with architecture. First the buildings were circular (he gave me a book on Spanish fortresses) then they became angular openings and complex relations of voids, and finally the double walled found fenestrations he used in India and Bangladesh. I began to suspect that maybe he wasn't so interested in coming to a conclusion for construction – there was always a better way.<sup>71</sup>

The second version of the scheme was completed shortly after Kahn's return from Dacca, Bangladesh in February 1963 (figs. 31a, 31b). Generally, all structures were shifted from their central distribution on the site to the southern end. This shift made use of a hillside at 103<sup>rd</sup> Street into which the underground structures were placed. The sand garden, as requested, was eliminated, and a central play area was created, boarded by the 103<sup>rd</sup> Street hill to the north and two slide mountains to the south. It featured a larger triangular step pyramid with two central wading pools, which combined some of the maze-like elements from the last version's sand garden. And across the central area were play sculptures that continued to reflect a handful of Noguchi's ideas developed in the *United Nations Playground*.

However, before the Parks Department could respond to this model, the site boundaries had been repositioned and reduced to half- the size by the organizational groups involved. In October of 1963, the third scheme was developed for the site extending between 102<sup>nd</sup> Street at the south to midway between 103<sup>rd</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> Streets at the north (figs. 32a, 32b). Essentially, the general form had been established in the second version; for the third, the subterranean rooms remained at the northern boundary with a slide mountain at the south. Carved into the hill at 103<sup>rd</sup> Street, the central area sat

well below the Riverside Drive street level, and could be accessed by a flight of stairs or pathway. A pyramid play structure with a tunnel hole was added, as was a second, smaller and centralized slide mountain.

Aside from the illustration that had appeared in the *Times* in 1962, none of the Kahn/Noguchi designs, in their varying states of change, had been released to the public. At one point, it seems to have been Morris's own decision to keep any developments from view, afraid that the designs "would not be understood by the public."<sup>72</sup> But by October, this was proving to be problematic.

On October 6<sup>th</sup>, the Riverside Parks and Playgrounds Committee organized the playground's growing number of opponents to picket the houses of Audrey Hess at 19 Beekman Place, and Mrs. Max Ascoli, Adele Levy's sister, at 23 Gramercy Park South. In retaliation, one of the playground's advocacy groups, the Neighborhood Council for Redevelopment, organized to distribute fliers and have petitions signed along Broadway between 102<sup>nd</sup> and 103<sup>rd</sup> Streets. When opponents approached the advocates, a "lively street-corner debate ensued."<sup>73</sup> The following day, the Riverside Parks and Playgrounds Committee presented a bitter letter of apology to the residents of Beekman Place and Gramercy Park for "disturbing your quiet neighborhoods," and reasserted its charges that the proposed project would destroy "four blocks of priceless and irreplaceable park land" for a memorial that would be "largely vainglorious, rather than useful."<sup>74</sup> Opponents saw a "giveaway" of public land for use as a private memorial, and separately claimed that the plans had been developed in secrecy without consultation with local residents.<sup>75</sup> To help mend the growing rift in the community, an October 17<sup>th</sup> meeting was planned to elicit

community views, and a second meeting was promised to unveil the project sketches as soon as a plan had been decided on.

Noguchi and Kahn completed the fourth plan in early 1964 (figs. 33a, 33b). It was a response to a few, small recommended changes. A couple of play elements were changed, as was the shape of the walls surrounding the central play space, and a new bank of seating was added at the northwest. As promised, upon the Park Department's approval, the plans were unveiled at a community meeting on February 4, 1964.

Reactions were solicited, but apprehensions tended to touch on general concerns such as staffing, programming, and safety. Throughout the press the Kahn/Noguchi model was lauded for its architectural qualities, and innovative, unconventional take on playground design. Indeed, even today the fourth model has been called an early "breakthrough for playground development." Especially important were the low, broad stairways for climbing and jumping with no dictated way to enter the site.<sup>76</sup> At the time, it was reported to be a "fanciful wonderland for children," and a few days after the February 4<sup>th</sup> meeting, the project was endorsed by a *New York Times* editorial, which claimed that "we are more often than not opposed to putting buildings in parks...but Messrs. Kahn and Noguchi have skillfully and imaginatively taken advantage of the contours in a way that improves the landscaping without any new above-ground structures."<sup>77</sup>

By the spring of 1964, the project had been underway for nearly three and a half years, and was now passing the initial deadline for construction set by Morris and the Parks Department in September 1962. Whether the delay was due to the continuing series of changes or requests for changes proposed by the organizers and the Parks Department, or more due to Kahn and Noguchi's continuing absences from the project as

they each tended to other projects abroad is unclear. Following the increasing press coverage in February, Hess began to stress speed to the designers. Concerned about sustaining public interest, but also spurred on by queries from financial contributors on behalf of Adele Levy, Hess and Ascoli expressed the need for Kahn and Noguchi to finalize their pre-preliminary design and draw up plans and estimates within three months. If Kahn and Noguchi could not do so, they felt the project should be abandoned.<sup>78</sup>

Responding quickly, Kahn and Noguchi developed the preliminary proposal for playground, an adapted version of their fourth plan, during March 1964 (figs. 34a, 34b). Along with attention to details such as lighting, plumbing, and electrical considerations for the subterranean rooms, the play elements were given more attention overall. The smaller central slide mountain was carved with ridges to act as circular steps for climbing and jumping, and the adjacent pyramid was broken into geometric plains, seemingly also out of consideration for climbing activities. Additionally, the smaller play elements in the center of the space were changed to simple L-shaped forms, which Noguchi would develop in a series of separate studies in conjunction with the project.

This completed design was fully formalized as a full set of project blueprints in April 1964, and these plans with the estimates were presented to Morris on the 20<sup>th</sup>. Between then and June, the Parks Department analyzed the proposal, requested further changes, and eventually arrived at a conclusion: what was problematic this time was the park's cost. When it came down to estimating cost of construction, at approximately \$1,129,191 Noguchi and Kahn's plans were in violation of their contract, which had stipulated that their design not exceed \$905,000 in total cost, including all aspects of

design and construction. The Parks Department Chief Engineer Paul Dombroski suggested that the team restudy specifically the recreation building to possibly reduce its size, and pair this with other means to manage the construction costs.<sup>79</sup>

Since Noguchi was again busy with work abroad, Kahn's office set to work on the changes, doing its best to maintain the integrity of the design, while making major cutbacks in cost. A resolution had been found by November 1964, and on the 9<sup>th</sup> it was approved by the Art Commission with Kahn in attendance (figs. 35a, 35b). A few weeks later in Jerusalem, Noguchi was notified of the approval and of the design changes. An associate of Kahn's described the building as simplified and reduced in area, with a number of changes made to Noguchi's central play space. An adaptation of his step pyramid had been simplified and expanded, the central play mountain and pyramid removed, and play elements reduced to a small number of angular structures. The reduced area remained problematic for even the staff members working on it, and Kahn was not satisfied with it either. Noguchi was told that the model "undoubtedly will change before the preliminary plans, now virtually completed, are submitted."<sup>80</sup> He was sent plans and photos and asked for his reactions.

Considering his contribution to the project, Noguchi's strong reaction could not have been surprising. Noguchi understood the need to make changes to fit the budget, but was quick to point out that this was, in fact, a playground first and foremost – the concerns of the space and the direction of funds should be towards the play function of the work. He maintained that his view of what play sculpture could be was hardly limited, and he appreciated how the architecture and sculpture were in some places indistinguishable, but pointed out that unless the team supplied distinctive play structure,

the Parks Department could be inclined to introduce some of their own equipment to the design.<sup>81</sup>

This exchange was the point of resolution. Over the course of 1965, with the City preparing the necessary steps towards approving and beginning construction of the project, Noguchi and Kahn created their last design, which redirected the project's focus towards providing a variety of centralized, sculpturally informed play structures (figs. 36, 37a-c). A series of holes were punched into architectural elements, and small climbing mounds replaced, along with a fountain and play court.

Yet, with a flurry of activity at the end of 1965, the project would ultimately be dropped. Noguchi and Kahn had overcome many problems set forth by the particularities of the Parks Department, budgetary concerns, design problems, and site changes. What had not been resolved, however, was the bickering among community groups who provided a variety of reasons why the playground could be seen as an assault on city land. When Kahn and Noguchi were experiencing such successes with the reception of their fourth model, a member of the opposing neighborhood committee, wishing to argue, had approached Kahn. Kahn seemed unmoved, and asked "Why don't you look at the model? There's nothing there that doesn't say park."<sup>82</sup> He was right. Many of the people were reportedly surprised that so little of the playground would appear as an intrusion on parkland, with grass covered hills the only thing poking out from the sunken court. But the issue was slightly larger than the aesthetically proper use of parkland.

Despite the community distress, Mayor Wagner, in his unwavering support for the Levy Memorial Playground, held a public signing for the city contract on December 29, 1965. He claimed at the ceremony that throughout his twelve years in office, "there have

been very few projects proposals which have encountered more obstacles, hurdles, hindrances, stumbling blocks and difficulties than this one.”<sup>83</sup> But even the signature of the contracts with the city would not bring the project to fruition. It had been an election year, and Democratic Wagner was to be succeeded in three days by Republican John V. Lindsay (in office January 1966-December 1973), who had pledged to fix the city’s grown fiscal and economic problems. The Levy Memorial, with half of the cost for the \$1.1 million project bid promised from the city, was an easy target for Lindsay and his supporters.

A second issue also remained at hand. Shortly before the contract signing, the Riverside Parks and Playgrounds Committee had attempted to obtain a court order to block the project. Instead, they had succeeded in serving Wagner and Morris a State Supreme court order requiring them show why the project should be constructed. One of the major issues had remained whether or not the community had been adequately involved in the development of the plans. Thomas P. F. Hoving, Parks Commissioner-designate, had made a last minute plea for the project to be stopped, stating in a letter that “unless open discussion is carried on with the citizens who will live with the playground, the project’s acceptance – even by those citizens who are in favor of the playground – will be sorely harmed.” Hoving was not against the project in principle, calling it one of the most “exciting” park designs to be conceived, and one that he would be willing to support were there more open discussion.<sup>84</sup> Mayor-elect Lindsay had also commented on the project, suggesting that “the memory of Mrs. Levy would be honored in a more significant manner if this fine playground were placed in an area where it was more needed.”<sup>85</sup> Opponents of the playground saw the incoming administration as a certain

ally.

One week after Wagner's public signing, the Riverside Parks and Playgrounds Committee filed a taxpayers suit against the project. The issue was still in the courts when Lindsay and Hoving announced their new support for the project, simply because it had "gone too far down the line to stop."<sup>86</sup> The decision was widely seen as a reversal of a campaign pledge, but with the city under contract signed by Wagner, Lindsay's administration was legally required to oppose the suit filed by opposition groups.

However, in April it was announced that the courts had ruled in favor of the suit. Construction bids had estimated the cost of the project over \$1.19 million, and with \$601,000 donated by the Levy family, and \$500,000 allocated in the city budget, the city remained \$99,533 short of the lowest construction bid submitted; without adequate funds, the city did not have the legal right to build the project. The Lindsay administration had the option to request new construction bids, and appeal the ruling. The Adele R. Levy Park Committee also began raising additional funds, and people outside of the groups, such as city planner Barry Benepe, suggested different locations for the plans, which the Levy group refused. They accused the administration of a lack of faith in the project, and lack of support, even accusing Hoving of secretly trying to strengthen the opposition to the park.<sup>87</sup>

Despite scrambling to correct budgetary issues and resolve discontent with the community, the project was ultimately abandoned on October 6, 1966, amongst a flurry of accusations. Opponents had instituted new action to stop any city efforts to overrule the State Supreme Court decision, this time alleging "improper use of park land."<sup>88</sup> With that action, the Adele Rosenwald Levy Memorial Committee requested that the city



return the money donated for the project, further accusing the Lindsay administration of placing “one obstacle after another in the way,” and that under the present administration “the playground and community center cannot be built and operated successfully.”<sup>89</sup> The city shot back, suggesting that the move would “penalize the children of New York,” and that the group should instead “make its generous gift available for a playground on a new site,” to “win universal acclaim and honor the memory of Adele Levy in a truly significant manner.”<sup>90</sup> But after six years of working to develop over nine plans for the playground with Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, the suggestion was drastically beside the point. The project was, from the start, as much about the work of Noguchi and Kahn than about the memorialization of Adele Levy.

What is evident from the project histories is that the failure of Noguchi’s playground designs was often circumstantial. The misunderstandings within the community during the Riverside project were not directly related to the work itself, nor, for that matter, were the prior existing construction agreements between the UN and the city. And the earlier projects succumbed to issues of timing: directly related to World War II, or simply coming at a time when innovation was placed on the backburner. Noguchi complained in an interview once about the Parks Department, saying he had “no use for them” after what they had done to hinder his playground projects.<sup>91</sup> Clearly, however, where Noguchi complained of the Parks Department willfully obstructing each proposal, or where Thomas Hess complained of a “ukase” on the part of Moses, these biased perspectives were ignorant of many other factors, circumstantial and not.

Yet, Noguchi and Thomas Hess’s complaints were founded in some sense of a larger issue at work. The problem is that these ideas assume an intentional distrust of

Noguchi's works on the part of the city, while instead, a more clear understanding of these projects shows that whatever problems Noguchi encountered were due more to misunderstanding.

What is evident from Noguchi's philosophical position is that he remained a sculptor when envisioning these spaces. These were to be large scale, environmental, and civic art works to the like of which had not been seen in New York. Furthermore, this was not outwardly acknowledged. Noguchi went to the Parks Department expecting to be received as a designer qualified to propose such utilitarian spaces. He was assuming a rite to usurp the role of landscape designer and entirely reinterpret previously trusted forms for play, within the notion that a sculptor could effectively provide for the imaginative development of children. His assumptions greatly preceded the mission New York City and its Parks Department in respect to the arts. The difficulty Noguchi experienced in New York with his proposals for playgrounds was due to the understanding of art's place in public spaces at the time.

By viewing these projects as unacknowledged works of public art, it is possible to overlap the histories of Noguchi's work, and the city's changing willingness to accept more radical interpretations of civic space by artists. New York has now arrived at a position where Noguchi's sculptural playgrounds seem plausibly within the progressive agenda. Yet much has changed over the past century to make this agenda possible.

### III. PUBLIC ART IN NEW YORK

New York City has had a rich history of sponsoring and providing space for public works of art. During the period following the Civil War up through World War I, the Beaux-Arts style was effecting a healthy production of monuments and decorative arts around the city. Today, evidence of this movement is visible in statuary and landmarks within and around the city's parks and civic buildings. This is the history of academic sculpture as part of stylistic conventions up until the 1930s. Heroic, monumental sculptures were erected to embody a civic ideal, with use of allegory and traditional symbols of virtue, pride, and the like. Ultimately, these conventions would break down in the 1920s, paving the way for the role of art in public space to be continuously questioned and adjusted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>92</sup> However, the conventions established in this time period, on place and function, would have a lasting impact.

When Noguchi had begun to develop his ideas regarding socially relevant sculpture in the early 1930s, a shift had taken place. With the onset of the Depression, President Roosevelt initiated his New Deal policies, and these political reforms would grow to encompass funding for the arts, in particular, funding for artists to create sculptures and murals for public places, along with programs for writers, musician, theater workers and historians. The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was the first of these programs from 1933-34, to be followed in 1935 by the larger Works Progress Administration (WPA), which would last until the Second World War began, ending all federally subsidized artwork programs in 1942. As for the program's goals regarding the

funding of public art, it generally promoted the construction of regionally significant works for government funded buildings and space. The result would be a mass of works patriotic in nature, deliberately attempting to create an American art form through Social Realism and Regionalism.

In New York, Noguchi would have been surrounded by contemporaries who were receiving WPA funding, such as his close friend Arshile Gorky. Noguchi himself was interested in applying his theories of sculpture to the government program, but would run into obstacles when attempting to join the WPA. He would recall creating a portrait head of Audrey McMann, the New York Director of the WPA Art Section, at her request, only to find that she disliked it and would refuse to admit him to the New York program.<sup>93</sup>

Yet, as with Noguchi's tendency to summarize all of his failures with the Parks Department by blaming Robert Moses, this story may also be slightly more complicated. It is generally evidenced that Noguchi was unwilling to create free-standing sculptures of the sort in which the WPA was interested. His developing theories of sculpture were instead becoming more grandiose. The 1933 proposal for *Playmountain* really predicts this turn. Indeed, for the WPA, Noguchi proposed a ground sculpture to cover a triangle of land in front of Newark Airport in New Jersey. It would be constructed to be seen only from the air from departing and landing flights. This earthwork, similar in conception to Noguchi's 1947 *Sculpture to be Seen from Mars*, was turned down, as it did not resonate with the ideals of the WPA program.<sup>94</sup>

This anecdote illustrates Noguchi's relationship with conventional expectations for public art at the time that he was creating and proposing the three earliest playgrounds in New York City. There was no precedent for this type of work, involved in shaping the

environment – especially no precedent for an artist proposing fully functional playground designs. Even outside of the New York City Parks Department, the arts agencies in place to oversee these types of sculptural contributions were unwilling to accept Noguchi unconventional perspectives.

With the end of the WPA, public art experienced a slow shift in its social role over the two decades between 1945 and 1965. Whereas Social Realism and Regionalism were dominant styles in public art under the New Deal initiatives, the broader American style in the arts experienced increasingly rapid shifts in the years following World War II. With the influx of many European intellectuals fleeing war-torn Europe, the avant-garde would find its new home in the United States, contributing to the new American abstraction, the New York school, and the subsequent development and breakdown of styles throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it would take until the 1960s for public art to begin to reflect these changes within the private realm, and abandon its perceived civic responsibility and obligation to memorialization, only to suffer in the follow decades from criticism that public art did nothing for the communities which it was suppose to serve and address. In the years since, public art organizations and sculptors have tried to address the new concerns about community and civic responsibility, while at the same time reflecting current ideals of art production, aesthetics, and conceptual concerns. Noguchi's *Riverside Playground* sat right at the cusp of these developments, but was still misunderstood and fraught with circumstantial difficulties.

The earliest of these changes in the agenda of public art took place with the founding of the General Services Administration's (GSA) Art-in-Architecture Program,

in 1963, which was soon followed by the Art-in-Public-Places Program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1967. These developments marked the beginning of the modern movement in federally funded public art, soon expanding to the state level with the initiation of numerous Percent for Art programs throughout the 1960s. These programs embraced modernism as the new national style, and are typified by work such as Alexander Calder's *La Grande Vitesse* (1969) in Grand Rapids, Michigan – the first of the NEA's grants.<sup>95</sup>

Later to be widely termed “plop art” for the tendency of these agencies to place simply enlarged abstract sculptures decoratively at the foot of office towers and city streets, the work of this era has been criticized as examples of misled public policy, attempting to revision public art for the time. These works were, at their worst, merely enlarged versions of abstract sculpture found in museums, which now served as accent pieces to adorn the stripped-down aesthetics of International Style architecture. Critics would later reflect that the work had no tangible engagement with the community at large. Noguchi himself was involved in these changes in public art, and would receive a new manner of commissions directly related to or inspired by this trend. His *Black Sun* (1969, fig. 38) was erected in Seattle as part of an NEA grant, and in New York, his *Red Cube* (1968, fig. 39) would become an abstract icon of the financial district.<sup>96</sup>

This is not to say that with these commissions Noguchi had found a suitable outlet for his desire to design socially relevant art; quite the contrary. His discontent would be reflected in his last interaction with the New York City Parks Department.

During the 1960s development in public art, even the New York City Parks Department's relationship with placing works of sculpture in its jurisdiction would

slowly evolve and reflect the influences of the NEA and GSA. The Lindsay administration, which had played a role in the failure of Noguchi's *Riverside Playground*, had appointed its Administrator of Cultural Affairs, August Heckscher, to the position of Parks Commissioner, following Hoving, in 1967-1972. Heckscher grew to become one of the Park Department's most progressive commissioners in terms of art and culture events, including a 1967 concert in Central Park by Barbra Streisand, attended by 250,000 people; the first New York City Marathon held in Central Park; a variety of authorized large-scale war protest on park land; and institution of a number of "happenings" in park spaces.<sup>97</sup>

Heckscher was also responsible for the beginning of the Parks Department's art-in-public-places programs. Early on, these initiatives would reflect the then-common notions about public art – that it should involve large, abstract, sculpture-objects. To an extent, these ideas remain in the department's current "Art in the Parks" program, which, this past year (2007) hosted its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration with 40 works of art by a variety of artists temporarily installed from October through early 2008. In 1967, Art in the Parks began as an idea meant to "demonstrate how significantly New York [could] be enhanced by having sculpture as a part of the public environment."<sup>98</sup>

Heckscher had included Noguchi as one the first artists to be invited to participate in the then-called "Sculpture-Environment" show, and wrote to him to request a work on loan for a six-week period. Noguchi was welcomed to choose the work and site.

However, Noguchi, who was working in Japan at the time, pointed out that he was not "in the habit" of making sculptures on a scale suited for environments, as had been requested. Perhaps inspired by his five failed attempts to realize playgrounds with

the department, he instead offered to provide any number of small-scale models of the type of play equipment developed for *Riverside Playground* for the Parks Department to select and enlarge for utilitarian display (figs. 40a, 40b).<sup>99</sup> Heckscher and his consultant, Samuel A. Green, were intrigued, and upon a studio visit, selected a mock-up of play-sculptures to be enlarged for Central Park at Fifth Avenue and 60<sup>th</sup> Street. Their idea was to place five together, with a sixth, single piece nearby, “so that the beauty of each single form can be best appreciated.”<sup>100</sup> A press release announced Noguchi’s participation, along with that of Claes Oldenburg, Barnett Newman, George Rickey, and others, but in the end he would not participate. Noguchi was expected to assume the cost of production for the loan, and furthermore, there is indication that he was simply disinterested in contributing the type of work that the Parks Department wanted.

Heckscher, who had not given up on including Noguchi in his programming, contacted the sculptor to again request his participation later in the year, following the reported success of the recently installed “Sculpture in Environment” program. A new concept called “Sculpture of the Month” would ideally display a monumental work by a different sculptor in a different city park location each month. He explained:

Our basic assumption which lends validity to this city-wide sculpture exhibition is that sculptors have work, or are planning work, of monumental dimensions which they want an opportunity to display. Your wiliness to participate would undoubtedly depend on whether this is true.<sup>101</sup>

Noguchi’s reaction was not subtle, perhaps resulting from his years of failed dealings with the department. Reiterating that he did not make “monumental” sculptures independently of commissioned projects, Noguchi first chastised the Parks Department for their assumptive position on the meaning of “environmental” sculpture. He would



state, “I have, of course, worked a good deal with ‘Sculptural Environment’ where the intention is really on the control of environment, and not primarily on the sculpture.”<sup>102</sup>

After years of his own sculptural environments embodied in the playground designs being turned down by the city, Noguchi would recommend,

While timely display of sculpture at odd spots selected by the sculptor may have a shock value [*sic*], I wonder whether the interests of sculpture in the long run would not be better served by allocating some suitable area in the park as a summer long show [...] or more permanently with a park-like outdoor setting [...] Better still would be an actual sculpture garden [...] where the totality is treated as a sculptural entity with changes of scale to allow both big and small sculptures. This would be a ‘sculptural environment’.<sup>103</sup>

Noguchi’s problems with the Parks Department’s conception of public art were here made clear. Putting the matter to rest, Noguchi ended, “should you be interested in some permanent development for the beauty of our city, I shall be most interested in contributing what I can.” The ideas outlined in this letter to Heckscher broadly reflect Noguchi’s own, highly developed notions of how art should and must contribute to society and public life. This manner of thinking was only just at the time becoming the concern of other sculptors working on large-scale or public projects, but Noguchi had been working under these notions for over thirty years. These values were reflected most definitely in his playground designs: sculptural, public, and environmental.

Later critics of the modern movement in public art, reflected here in the actions of the Parks Department, track a progression of new ideas that developed from many of the problems with the GSA and NEA’s early grant programs. Unsatisfied with the decorative function of public art, some artists would begin to consider their work qualified to address new problems, in arenas previously limited to the work of landscape designers

and architects. This would eventually include playgrounds, among other landscaped features.

Art historian Miwon Kwon, in a book that charts the issue of site specificity in art, described a set of paradigms characterizing public art after the 1960s. She sees the concern of site-specific art merging with concerns about public art's social relevancy. The NEA and GSA style art-in-public-places approach was to be succeeded in the 1970s by the art-as-public-spaces approach, and the art-in-the-public-interest model.<sup>104</sup> The classic example of this in change-in-action would be the removal of the long-disputed *Tilted Arc* (1981, removed 1989, fig. 41) by Richard Serra from its place on New York's Federal Plaza, to be replaced by Martha Schwartz's urban-landscape design (1991, fig. 42). Serra's *Arc* was to become one of the most bitterly fought examples of the art-in-public-places approach, when workers at Federal Plaza began to complain that the 120-foot-long, 12-foot-high sculpture was obstructing the entrance of the building, collecting trash at its expansive base, and dirtying the look of the plaza as it began to rust. A 1979 GSA commission, it was taken down after years of legal battles, to be replaced by a true art-as-public-spaces commission. Schwartz changed the space to a colorful, Disney-like park area with florescent, serpentine benches curving around half-sphere grass mounds.

This change signaled the beginning of a new mode of thought in public art – one concerned with producing spaces to aesthetically and functionally contribute to urban living. Public art, for the first time, could encompass spaces like playgrounds, acceptably proposed by a sculptor, this time as art. Only when these new approaches became part of the institutional programs governing public art would Noguchi's playgrounds have been feasible; and only by understanding how public art has come to now commonly

encompass sculpturally inspired parks, gardens, playgrounds, can one fully appreciate the failed impact of Noguchi's work, which in a sense was simply as much as five decades too early. His playground designs now appear to have prefigured the most recent concerns in the production of public art, making this body of work a seminal aspect of Noguchi's career and an overlooked part of the history of progressive public art as it is known today.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Noguchi never saw a playground proposal realized in New York. In fact, of all of his ambitious projects, most expanding beyond the traditional role of a sculptor to that of a designer or landscapist, playgrounds were the least successful of his ideas (although, this fact is primarily due to the failures in New York). His first success was overseas, when the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan commissioned a “children’s land” space outside of Tokyo in 1965-66. Noguchi’s *Playground for Kodomo No Kuni* (fig. 43) was a surprise for the sculptor when, unlike his experience in New York, construction began immediately. The design was widely reflective of his ideas for the *United Nations Playground*. In fact, these five specific projects were direct progenitors of many future ideas. The only other playground to be realized during his lifetime was *Playscapes* (1975-76, fig. 44), in Piedmont Park, Atlanta, Georgia. Sponsored by the city’s High Museum of Art, it featured a variety of Noguchi’s expanded ideas for freestanding equipment, as well as some older elements, such as the multiple-length swing set from his 1939 *Play Equipment*.

Later on, with changing attitudes nation wide to environmental public art, Noguchi would receive a number of significant commissions for parks and plazas in cities such as Detroit and Miami. Additionally, a vast park in Sapporo, Japan, *Moerenuma*, completed after Noguchi’s death in 1988, would be dedicated solely to the sculptor’s environmental proposals, including a built variation of the 1933 *Playmountain*. However, for all of Noguchi’s attempts to realize the most utilitarian iteration of his original ideology, a playground in New York, the upcoming Rainey Park playground is

the closest the city has come to building one of Noguchi's sculptures for everyday living. Sadly, however, the Capital Project Division's adaptation is generally misguided. The design, developed without the guidance of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, is more of a whimsical interpretation of some of the unrealized playground elements, with many other qualities entirely unrelated to Noguchi's former designs. Indeed, the work is merely Noguchi-esque.

New York's cultural programs did not match Noguchi's until quite recently. But with the arrival of projects such as the Rainey Park playground and Eliasson's *Waterfalls* comes the opportunity to reconsider the New York playground proposals, simply in terms of their place in the city's history.

Noguchi, like any other sculptor, is best known for his successes. Unrealized projects invariably contain less historical significance. Yet occasionally, proposals themselves, albeit unrealized, seemingly exert enough weight to inspire insightful commentary, and contribute to the history of art. Noguchi's playgrounds, misunderstood for decades, warrant such attention. As New York continues to embrace the benefits of environmental public art, and parklands inspired by sculpture, it is increasingly evident that the five New York playground proposals prefigured these trends, and stand as significantly early indicators of the coming changes in art in public spaces.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Press Release, “Mayor Bloomberg And Public Art Fund Announce Major Public Art Project By Artist Olafur Eliasson,” New York City Website, Office of the Mayor, January 15, 2008, [http://www.nyc.gov:80/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor\\_press\\_release&catID=1194&doc\\_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2008a%2Fpr014-08.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1](http://www.nyc.gov:80/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor_press_release&catID=1194&doc_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2008a%2Fpr014-08.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1), (accessed 3 February 3 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See, Paul Cummings, “Interview with Isamu Noguchi,” *The Smithsonian Archives of American Art*, conducted on November 7, 1973, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/noguch73.htm>, (accessed 4 April 2007).

<sup>4</sup> This idea has been recently pointed out in an essay by Bruce Altshuler, “Isamu Noguchi Indoors: Home Furnishings and Interior Design”, *Isamu Noguchi: Sculptural Design*, (Germany: Vitra Design Museum, 2001), 109-52.

<sup>5</sup> This impulse can be seen in many of the groups and movements in Europe around the time of World War I. Some of the best examples can be found in the manifestoes of, for example, the Dadaists and Futurists, De Stijl and the Bauhaus. Noguchi’s own ideas about sculpture finding a meaningful place in modern life, and his turn towards incorporating aspects of industrial and landscape design in his sculptural practice relate most closely to ideas behind the creation of the Bauhaus. See, Walter Gropius, “The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus,” in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 338-43, (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), originally published in *Bauhaus: 1919-1928*, edited by Walter Gropius and Ise Gropius, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938).

<sup>6</sup> Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor’s World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 60.

<sup>7</sup> Isamu Noguchi, “Excerpts from Essay for Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura”, 1952, reprinted in Diane Apostolos-Cappadona and Bruce Altshuler, ed., *Isamu Noguchi: Essays and Conversations* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 39.

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in “Social Theme Development by Noguchi,” *The Art Digest*, February 1, 1935.

<sup>9</sup> Cummings, “Interview,” np.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on Reform era playgrounds, see: Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 61-99.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>12</sup> See: Susan G Solomon, *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space*, (London: University Press of New England, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> For more on Robert Moses's playground initiatives and how his efforts fit in with the history of playground design in New York City, see: Hillary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. *Robert Moses and the Modern City: the Transformation of New York*, (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 2007), 174-89.

<sup>14</sup> Noguchi, *Sculptor's World*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Noguchi's industrial designs remain some of the sculptor's best known works. There is a wealth of information on this aspect of his career. One of the most recent collections is in the catalog for the ongoing exhibition at the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, "Design: Isamu Noguchi and Isamu Kenmochi," (20 September 2007 – 5 May 2008). See: *Design: Isamu Noguchi and Isamu Kenmochi*. New York: Five Ties Publishing, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> See, Noguchi, *Sculptor's World*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Isamu Noguchi, "Playground Equipment," *Architectural Forum* 72, October 1940, 245.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Noguchi's memory was notoriously flawed. In his autobiography, Noguchi explained that it was McCoy's unexpected death that ended the project in Hawaii, prompting him to promote the idea in New York City instead. However, this could not have been case, as records indicate McCoy died in 1942 at the age of 65, not 1939 when Noguchi approached the New York City Parks Department. The reason for the failure of the Honolulu commission remains unclear. See: Noguchi, *Sculptor's World*, 176. Information on McCoy's death was found at "The History of Today: June 12<sup>th</sup>," *The Honolulu Advertiser*, online edition, <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2006/Jun/12/ln/150history.html>, (accessed 20 December 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Noguchi, *Sculptor's World*, 176.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 176.

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<sup>23</sup> There is some evidence of the Park Department's consideration of the project in a letter from the Parks Department of Architectural Forum, who was interested in photographing Noguchi's work while it was in the possession of James Mullholand. See: Letter, James V. Mulholand to Howard Myers of The Architectural Forum, 14 January 1941, folder "Playgrounds – 1940-1975" at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>24</sup> A classic biography of Moses best captures these ideas. See: Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, (New York: Random House, 1974).

<sup>25</sup> See, Bonnie Rychlak, "Shifting Desires for Parks and Playgrounds: Noguchi's Landscape Designs" *Isamu Noguchi: Connecting the World Through Sculpture*, (Japan: Yokohama Museum of Art, 2006), 15-18.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 607.

<sup>28</sup> For more information on Moses's involvement with the construction and negotiations with the United Nations, see: Hillary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, 311-313.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>30</sup> George Barrett, "Moses Wants Acre of Land In UN Site for Playground," *New York Times*, 16 December 1949, 1.

<sup>31</sup> "Moses Faces Rebuff On UN Playground," *New York Times*, 17 December 1949, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Barrett, "Moses Wants Acre of Land."

<sup>33</sup> "Lie Agrees to Have Playground At UN," *New York Times*, 7 April 1951, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Hess was the granddaughter of Sears Roebuck chairman Julius Rosenwald and the niece of William Rosenwald, president of the United Jewish Appeal-Federation of Jewish Philanthropies Board. Her aunt, Adele Rosenwald Levy, was the cofounder and first president of the Citizens Committee for Children, where Hess would also be a long time committee member, one-time president, and chairman of its Children's Rights section. Hess's husband, Thomas Hess, was a respected art critic, and kept the couple well-connected in the New York art world. They were, for one, close personal friends with Willem and Elaine de Kooning.



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<sup>35</sup> Audrey Hess, Timeline of Events, no date, file “United Nations – Playground 1951-1952,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>36</sup> Noguchi, *Sculptor’s World*, 176.

<sup>37</sup> Hess, Timeline. Noguchi would claim in his autobiography that he had chosen Whittlesey as a collaborator, saying “upon finishing the model and submitting it, I asked Julien [*sic*] Whittlesey, the architect, to join with Mrs. Hess in promoting its realization, as I had other things to do in Japan.” Noguchi, *Sculptor’s World*, 176. However, it is also likely that Hess or a member of her group chose Whittlesey, as her notes indicate that the two were asked to participate around the same time. Whittlesey was also present in meetings from the very beginning. See file “United Nations – Playground 1951-1952,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>38</sup> Hess, Timeline, “Meeting, Bennett, Hess, Whittlesey,” 4 May 1951.

<sup>39</sup> Hess, Timeline, “Letter, Bennett to Hess,” 21 May 1951.

<sup>40</sup> Hess, Timeline, “Letter, Hess to Lie,” 14 August 1951.

<sup>41</sup> Aline B. Louchheim, “United Nations Rejects Model Playground: Moses Project is Accepted Instead,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1951, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Hess, Timeline, “Letter, Lie to Hess,” 28 September 1951. Lie was quoted to have apologized for the delay in response, reasoning that he had “wanted to study further the various problems connected with our site development.”

<sup>43</sup> Louchheim, “United Nations Rejects Model Playground.”

<sup>44</sup> Noguchi, *Sculptor’s World*, 176-77.

<sup>45</sup> Louchheim, “United Nations Rejects Model Playground.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Solomon, *American Playgrounds*, 25.

<sup>48</sup> TBH, “The Rejected Playground,” *Art News* 5, April 1952, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Dorothy Barclay, “Playgrounds That Are Something More,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1952, SM52.

<sup>50</sup> Emma Harrison, “Shouts of Children Echo Again In Revived Uptown Playground,” *New York Times*, 8 August 1960, 23.

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<sup>51</sup> 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. Hess writes in this fundraising letter that she was “approached by several people connected with the Bloomingdale Conservation Project, including Miss Cornelia Goldsmith, Heath Department; Miss Helen Harris, United Neighborhood Houses; Mrs. Gabel and Mrs. Randolph Guggenheimer, City Planning Commission, who wished to see the large play space between 101<sup>st</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> streets [...] become an integral part of the lives of the members of the community. They remembered the plan for the United Nations and at their request, I contacted Mr. Noguchi who has expressed his willingness to undertake the design of the area.”

<sup>52</sup> Letter, Hess to Noguchi, 21 October 1960, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1960-1961,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>53</sup> Noguchi, *Sculptor’s World*, 177.

<sup>54</sup> Letter, Hess to Noguchi, 21 October 1960. Hess writes: “They would also like to see something built where concerts etc could be held, but that need not concern you. Anyway, everyone’s first choice to design the playground area (or part of it) is you and I am writing to ascertain if you would be interested in this.”

<sup>55</sup> Letter, Hess to Frank Caplan, 22 June 1961, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1960-1961,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Hess writes: “In the meantime, Isamu Noguchi is very anxious to begin working [...] I told him that you had offered to find an architect and Isamu would like very much to meet whoever you have in mind.” Frank Caplan is an individual who would play a small role in Noguchi’s overall time spent on playgrounds and equipment. He had met Noguchi through Hess in 1953 and solicited his participation as a consultant for his company, Creative Playthings, which sought to build sculpturally informed play objects and spaces. Caplan and Creative Playthings are generally responsible for MoMA’s interest in showing work such as Noguchi and Whittlesey’s *United Nations Playground*. For more information, see: Solomon, *American Playgrounds*, 26-36.

<sup>57</sup> Isamu Noguchi, “The Road I Have Walked,” *Play Mountain: Noguchi + Kahn*, (Tokyo: Watari-um, 1996), 100. Speaking of his doubt in the project, Noguchi claimed: “I thought that if I got a great architect to help me, maybe I could do it. So I asked Louis Kahn, and he said yes, he would help me.” But the selection of Kahn was most likely a collaborative effort. Kahn was formally brought on to the project by August 23<sup>rd</sup>, when Helen M. Harris (executive director, United Neighborhood Houses), wrote to him to offer a formalized agreement. Caplan’s hand in the decision is evident, as the letter ccs Noguchi, Caplan and Hess. See: Letter, Helen M. Harris to Louis Kahn, 23 August 1961, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1960-1961,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

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<sup>58</sup> Louis I. Kahn indicated in 1954 that he hoped he would be able to find a playground commission, something his colleague Robert Geddes had just become involved in. See *Louis Kahn to Anne Tyng: The Rome Letters 1953-1955* (New York: Rizzoli, 1997); see letter 17 June 1954.

<sup>59</sup> Isamu Noguchi, "On Louis Kahn," 1975, republished in Altshuler and Apostolos-Cappadona, *Isamu Noguchi: Essays and Conversations*, 126-27.

<sup>60</sup> Letter, Noguchi to Louis Kahn, 29 August 1961, file "Riverside Park – Playground 1960-1961," at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>61</sup> Letter, Hess to Noguchi, 21 October 1960.

<sup>62</sup> 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.

<sup>63</sup> Letter, Hess to Morris, 23 May 1962, file "Riverside Park – Playground 1962-63," at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation. See note 34 for more on Adele Rosenwald Levy. The project had, in fact, been intended as a memorial to Levy since the beginning of Hess's involvement, however, the extent to which the family would be involved in contribution, and how *much* of the proposed playground would be the memorial had not been decided. Hess's letter to Morris on May 23 is the first indication that the family and participating groups had come to a decision, and the first time that the city was informed.

<sup>64</sup> Letter, The Kahn-Noguchi Company to Paul B. Dombroski, Chief Engineer, Department of Parks, 24 September 1962, file "Riverside Park – Playground 1962-63," at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>65</sup> Samuel Kaplan, "Play Area To Fit Contours of Park," *New York Times*, 24 October 1962, 41. Mayor Wagner is at least known to have supported the playground since it had been offered as a memorial to Adele Levy. Wagner was a close personal friend of Levy and would continue to back the memorial throughout his term in office. See "Rites for Mrs. Levy Set," *New York Times*, 14 March 1960, Wagner states, "Perhaps no man or woman in our lifetime has given more of their time and energy to the great humanitarian causes of the day than this fine and noble woman. Her loss will be particularly felt by the thousands of less fortunate people whom she was willing to help toward a better life. Mrs. Wagner and I counted Mrs. Levy among our closest personal friends and we are deeply saddened by her death."

<sup>66</sup> Letter, Morris to Harris, 20 February 1962. As mentioned in above text, Morris commented that these two elements were the mark of a more widely beneficial development, stating: "When a proposal is made for the expenditure of that much money on a new park facility, I think immediately at least in terms of a project of borough-wide, if not city-wide, benefit. I think of an outdoor swimming pool or an artificial ice-skating

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rink which gives wholesome recreation and enjoyment to many thousands of persons, young and old. In the case of skating rinks, for instance, we already have on in each of the boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens and they draw capacity crowds [...] I mention this because one can justify spending a large sum for a project with such widespread benefits and popular appeal, but one cannot do so for a facility useful primarily to one comparatively small group in a local community.”

<sup>67</sup> Letter, John Mulcahy to Kahn-Noguchi Company, 5 December 1962, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1962-63,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>68</sup> Noguchi was in Jerusalem working on the Billy Rose Sculpture Garden, and Kahn was in Dacca, Bangladesh until February 1963.

<sup>69</sup> Letter, David Wisdom, Assistant to Louis Kahn, to Noguchi, 10 January 1963, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1962-63,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>70</sup> Farnsworth Fowle, “Riverside Group Scores Park Plan,” *New York Times*, 2 October 1963, 30.

<sup>71</sup> Noguchi, “On Louis Kahn,” 126.

<sup>72</sup> Memo, signed LTB, 4 June 1963, from Box LIK33, Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, republished in *Playmountain: Louis Kahn + Isamu Noguchi*, 49. “Mr. Noguchi telephoned office at 12:30pm. He had received a telephone call from Mrs. Hess regarding the model [...] The Parks Department had again requested using the model for publicity and Mrs. Hess stresses the fact that it should not be permitted unless first cleared with Commissioner Newbold Morris. It was his original feeling that it would not be understood by the public and would therefore not be wise to show. His feelings may not be the same now, but do talk to him about it first.”

<sup>73</sup> Edith Evans Asbury, “Battle is Intensified Over Plan to Redevelop Riverside Park,” *New York Times*, 5 October 1963, 14.

<sup>74</sup> “Apology Made in Park Dispute,” *New York Times*, 6 October 1963, 68.

<sup>75</sup> Asbury, “Battle is Intensified Over Plan to Redevelop Riverside Park.”

<sup>76</sup> Solomon, *American Playgrounds*, 50.

<sup>77</sup> “Parks Are For Park Purposes,” *New York Times*, 8 February 1964, 22. Also see: Joseph Lelyveld, “Model Play Area For Park Shown,” *New York Times*, 5 February, 1964, 37; “Kahn-Noguchi Playground Proposed for New York,” “News Report,” *Progressive Architecture*, March 1964, 67.

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<sup>78</sup> Letter, Hess to Kahn, 10 February 1964, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1964-66,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>79</sup> Letter, Paul B. Dombroski, Chief Engineer, Parks Department, to The Kahn-Noguchi Company, 25 June 1964, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1964-66,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation. Dombroski states, “It is imperative that you comply with the terms of your service contract which definitively states the cost of construction which was approved by the Mayor.”

<sup>80</sup> Letter, Arthur W. Jones Jr. to Noguchi, 25 November 1964, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1964-66,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation. Interestingly, historians of Noguchi do not tend to count this model in the tally of project designs. In fact, many texts only count five designs total. For this version, the reason may be due to Noguchi’s lack of participation in the design, or the relatively short time that the model was considered. However, since this particular model was the version seen and approved by the Art Commission, it cannot be discounted. See, Ana Maria Torres, *Isamu Noguchi: A Study of Space*, (New York: Monacelli Press, 2000), 136-51.

<sup>81</sup> Letter, Noguchi to Jones, 3 December 1964, file “Riverside Park – Playground 1964-66,” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>82</sup> Lelyveld, “Model Play Area For Park Shown.”

<sup>83</sup> Samuel Kaplan, “Mayor Signs Pact for Play Center,” *New York Times*, 30 December 1965, 31.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ralph Blumenthal, “Mayor Now Backs Levy Playground,” *New York Times*, 19 February 1966, 28.

<sup>87</sup> “New Suit Attacks Levy Memorial,” *New York Times*, 6 October 1966, 51.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Edith Evans Asbury, “Group Abandons Levy Memorial,” *New York Times*, 7 October 1966, 45.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. Hoving quoted.

<sup>91</sup> Cummings, “Interview,” np.

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<sup>92</sup> For an account and perspective on the history of public sculpture in New York City during this era, see Michele H. Bogart, *Public Sculpture and the Civic Ideal in New York City: 1890-1930*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

<sup>93</sup> Noguchi, *Sculptor's World*, 23. Noguchi would also make reference to the event in his interview with Paul Cummings, where he said, humorously: "I tried to get on the WPA. And I was always turned down. Then I did a head of the Audrey McMahan who was head of the WPA in New York. And that sort of clinched my disfavor among them because I think she hated this head. I mean she was sort of ugly as a mud fence and I guess I made her even more so." See, Cummings, "Interview," np.

<sup>94</sup> Noguchi, *Sculptor's World*, 23.

<sup>95</sup> For more information on the development and problems with this time period, see Casey Nelson Blake, "Between Civics and Politics: The Modernist Movement in Federal Public Art," *The Arts of Democracy: Art, Public Culture, and the State*, (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Press, 2007), chapter 8. For more information on the history of the NEA's public art programs, see John Beardsley, *Art in Public Places: A Survey of Community Sponsored Projects Supported by the NEA*, (Washington: Partners for Livable Places, 1981).

<sup>96</sup> *Red Cube* was not one of the NEA or GSA grant projects, but a privately funded commission from Marine Midland Bank, at 140 Broadway (currently HSBC). This case touches on some of the issues with discussing public art. If the work is in public view on private property, does it qualify as a work of public sculpture? Regardless, the aesthetics governing the choice of commission reflect the trends embodied in public arts programs such as the GSA and NEA, whereas, previously Noguchi's unconventional theories of sculpture were gaining ground in his private commissions, such as the *Sunken Garden for Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza*, (1961-64) a few block away.

<sup>97</sup> Indecently, the fact that Heckscher was responsible for developing a program for in-park "happenings" in the late 1960s also reflects the progression of avant-garde art in the public sphere; the Parks Department was catching up with the progress of modern art. Happening, such as those organized and performed by Allan Kaprow and Yves Kline had begun to enter the art historical cannon in the 1950s.

<sup>98</sup> Letter, August Heckscher to Noguchi, 21 June 1967, file "Central Park Sculpture – Unrealized 1967-68" at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>99</sup> Letter, Noguchi to Heckscher, 26 June 1967, file "Central Park Sculpture – Unrealized 1967-68" at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>100</sup> Letter, Heckscher to Noguchi, 15 August 1967, file "Central Park Sculpture – Unrealized 1967-68" at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

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<sup>101</sup> Letter, Heckscher to Noguchi, 26 December 1967, file “Central Park Sculpture – Unrealized 1967-68” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>102</sup> Letter, Noguchi to Heckscher, 23 January 23 1968, file “Central Park Sculpture – Unrealized 1967-68” at the Isamu Noguchi Foundation.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), chapter 3, 56-99.

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Figures

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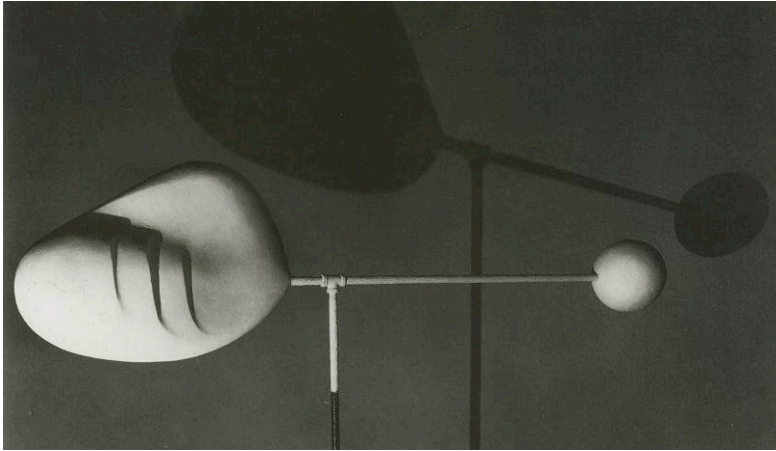


Fig. 1  
Isamu Noguchi, *Musical Weathervane*, 1933. Unrealized. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

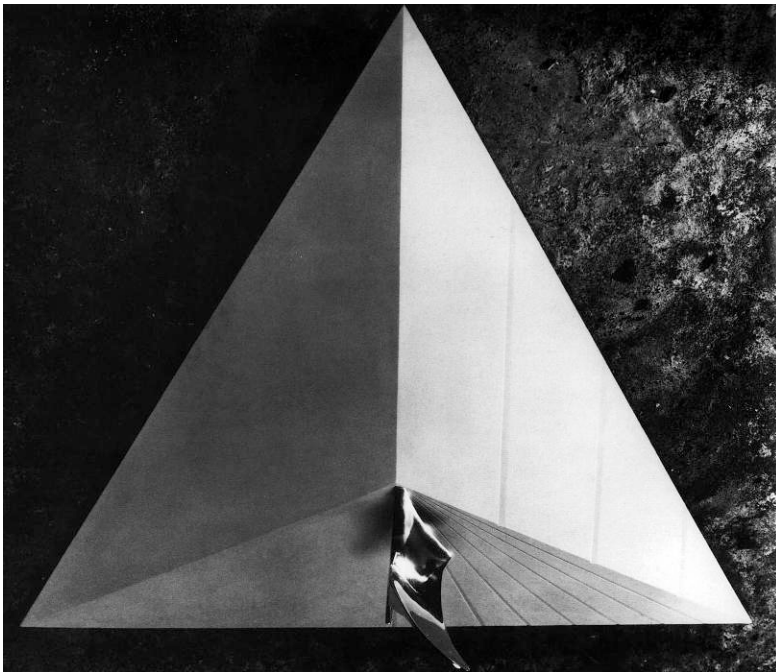


Fig. 2a  
Isamu Noguchi, Model for *Monument to the Plough*, 1933, plaster. Unrealized. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

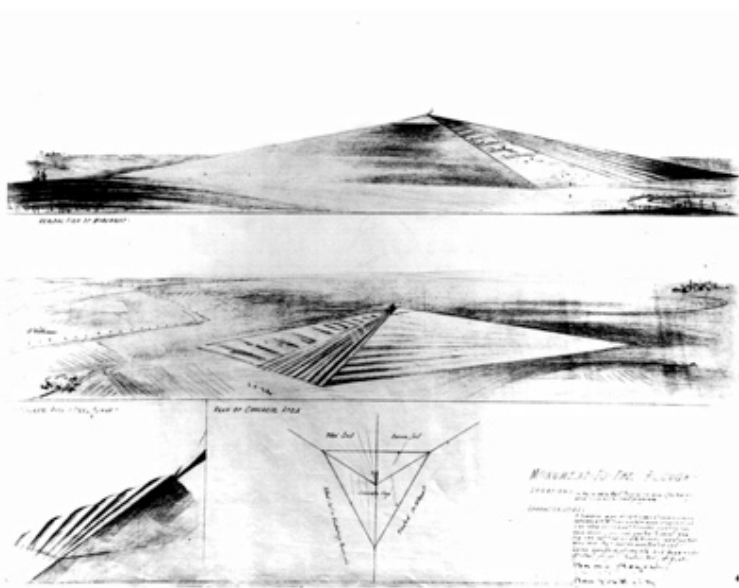


Fig. 2b  
Isamu Noguchi, Drawing for *Monument to the Plough*, 1933. Unrealized. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 3  
Isamu Noguchi, *Memorial to Ben Franklin*, conceived in 1933, realized in 1985. Philadelphia, PA. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

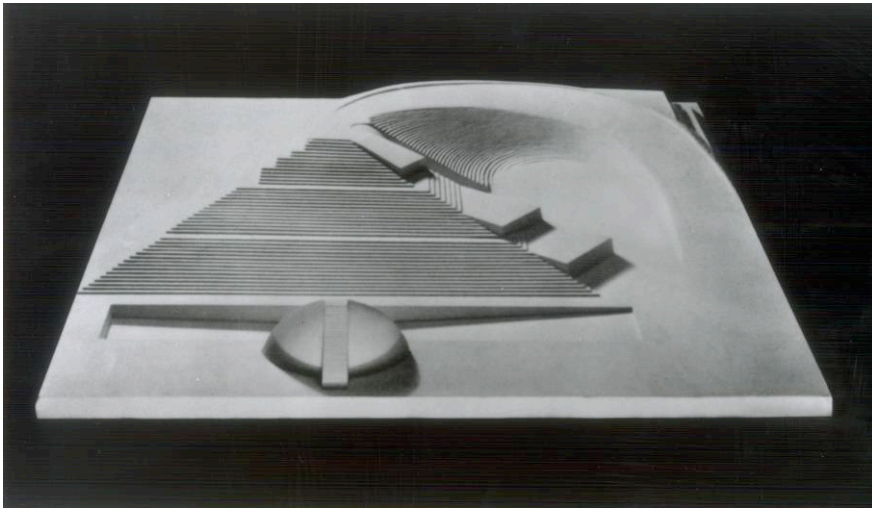


Fig. 4  
Isamu Noguchi, Model of *Playmountain*, 1933, plaster. Unrealized. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 5  
Isamu Noguchi, *Portrait Head of Murdock Pemberton*, 1931, bronze. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

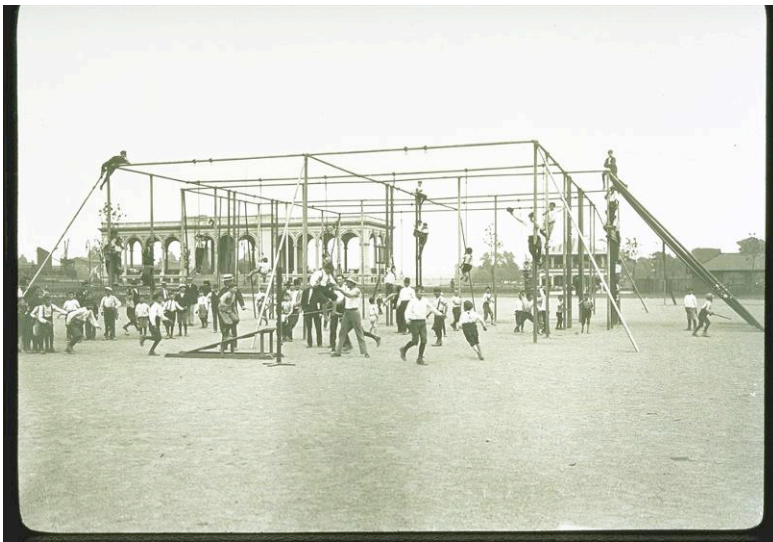


Fig. 6  
Seward Park Playground, intersection of East Broadway and Canal and Essex Streets,  
New York, NY, 1912. (Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Graduate School of  
Design, Harvard University.)

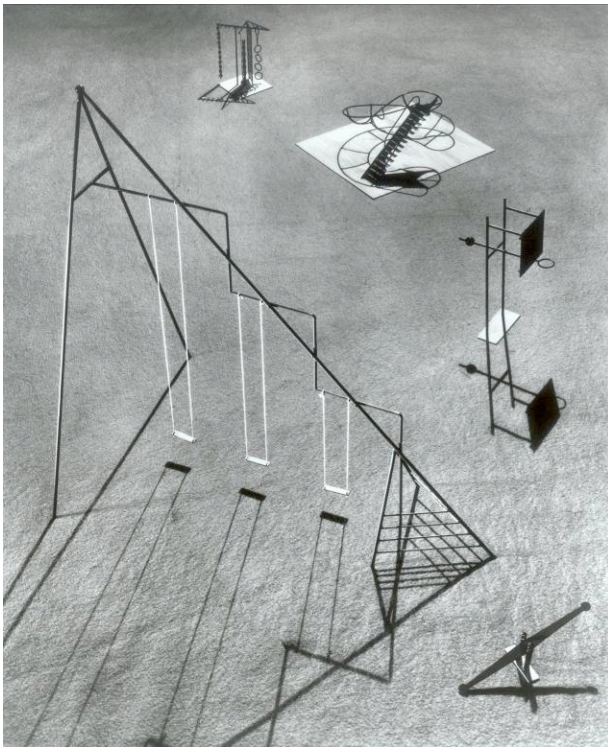


Fig. 7a  
Isamu Noguchi, *Model of Playground Equipment for Ala Moana Park*, Hawaii, 1940.  
Unrealized. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

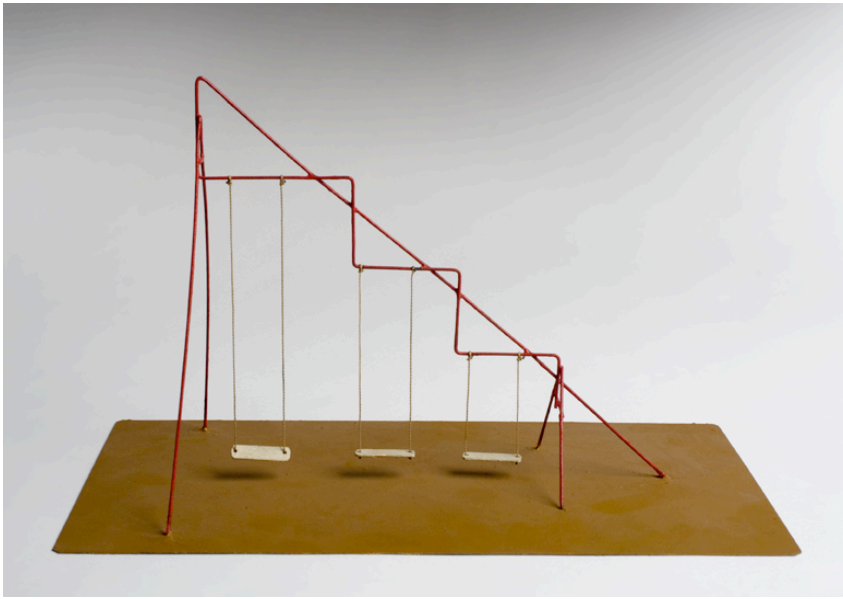


Fig. 7b  
Isamu Noguchi, Model of Swing Set, *Playground Equipment for Ala Moana Park*, Hawaii, 1940. Unrealized. (Photo: Kevin Noble, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 7c  
Isamu Noguchi, Model of Slide, *Playground Equipment for Ala Moana Park*, Hawaii, 1940. Unrealized. (Photo: Kevin Noble, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 7d  
Isamu Noguchi, *Model of Climbing Apparatus*, *Playground Equipment for Ala Moana Park*, Hawaii, 1940. Unrealized. (Photo: Kevin Noble, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 8  
Isamu Noguchi, *Slide Mantra*, 1966-1989, black granite. Installed at West 8-chome, Odori Park, Sapporo, Japan. (Photo: Michio Noguchi, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)





Fig. 9  
Isamu Noguchi, *Octetra*, c. 1968. Spoleto, Italy. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 10  
Isamu Noguchi, Detail of *History Mexico*, 1936, cement with pigment. Abelardo Rodriguez Market, Mexico City, Mexico. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 11

Isamu Noguchi, *Ford Fountain (Chassis Fountain)* for the 1939 New York Worlds Fair, magnesite. Destroyed. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 12

Isamu Noguchi, *Press photo of News, 1938-40*, stainless steel. Associated Press Building, Rockefeller Center, New York City. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

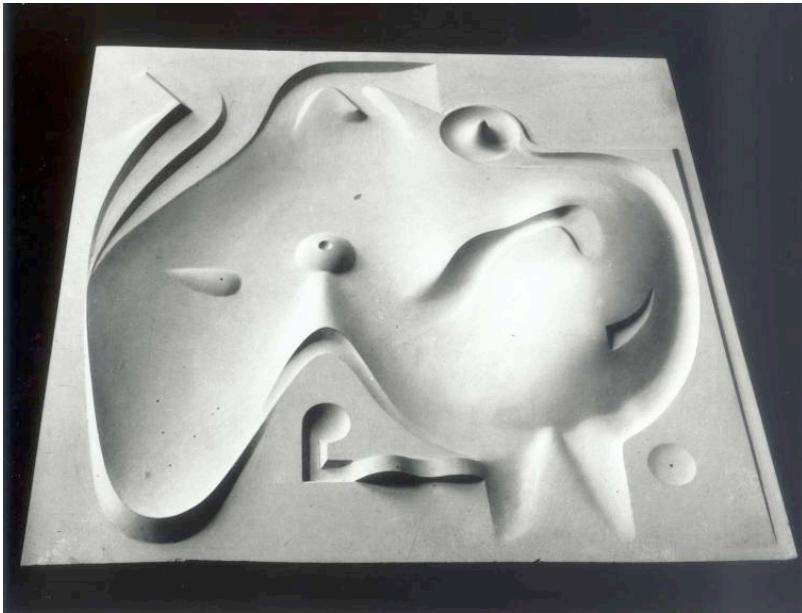


Fig. 13a

Isamu Noguchi, *Contoured Playground*, 1941, plaster. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 13b

Isamu Noguchi, *Contoured Playground*, 1941, bronze. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 14  
Isamu Noguchi, *This Tortured Earth*, 1943, bronze. Unrealized. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 15  
Isamu Noguchi, Model for *Sculpture to be Seen from Mars*, 1947. Unrealized. (Photo: Soichi Sunami, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 16  
Isamu Noguchi, Lunar ceiling for Time-Life Building, New York City, 1947. Destroyed.  
(Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 17  
Isamu Noguchi, Ceiling for the American Stove Company Building, St. Louis, Missouri,  
1947-48. (Photo: Hedrich-Blessing, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long  
Island City, New York.)



Fig. 18a

Isamu Noguchi, *Shinu (To Die)*, concrete bridge railings for Hiroshima's Peace Park, 1951-52. (Photo: Isamu Noguchi, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 18b

Isamu Noguchi, *Ikiru (To Live)*, concrete bridge railings for Hiroshima's Peace Park, 1951-52. (Photo: Michio Noguchi, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

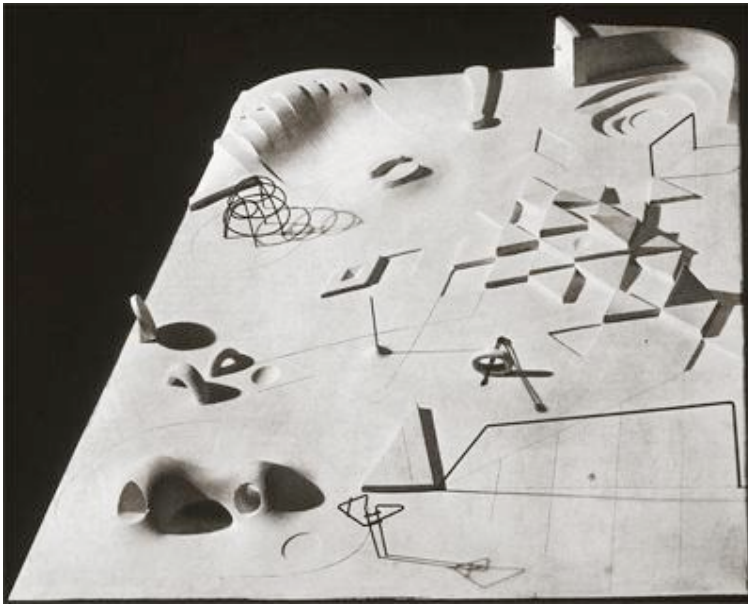


Fig. 19a  
Isamu Noguchi, Overview of *Model of the Playground for United Nations Headquarters*, New York City, 1952. Unrealized. (Photo: Charles Uht, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 19b  
Isamu Noguchi, Dual side-views of *Model of the Playground for United Nations Headquarters*, New York City, 1952. Unrealized. (Photo: Charles Uht, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 19c

Isamu Noguchi, *Model of the Playground for United Nations Headquarters*, New York City, 1952, bronze. Unrealized. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 20a

Isamu Noguchi, *Shin Banraisha*, Memorial Room to Yone Noguchi, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan, 1951-52. (Photo: Chuji Hirayama, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)





Fig. 20b

Isamu Noguchi, Memorial garden for Yone Noguchi, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan, 1951-52. (Photo: Chuji Hirayama, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

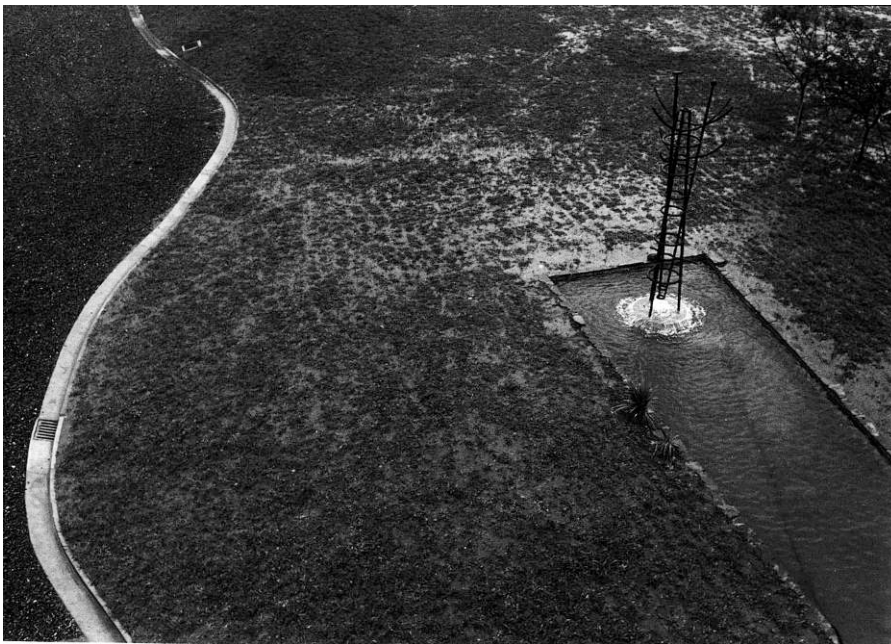


Fig. 21

Isamu Noguchi, *Garden and Fountain for Readers Digest Building*, Tokyo, Japan, 1951. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 22a

Isamu Noguchi, *Gardens For Connecticut General Life Insurance Company*, 1956-57.  
(Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 22b

Isamu Noguchi, *Gardens For Connecticut General Life Insurance Company*, 1956-57.  
(Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 23  
Isamu Noguchi, *Gardens for UNESCO*, 1956-58. UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 24  
Isamu Noguchi, *First National City Bank Plaza, Fort Worth Plaza*, 1960-61. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 25

Isamu Noguchi, *Sunken Garden for Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library*, 1960-64. Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. (Photo: Isamu Noguchi, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

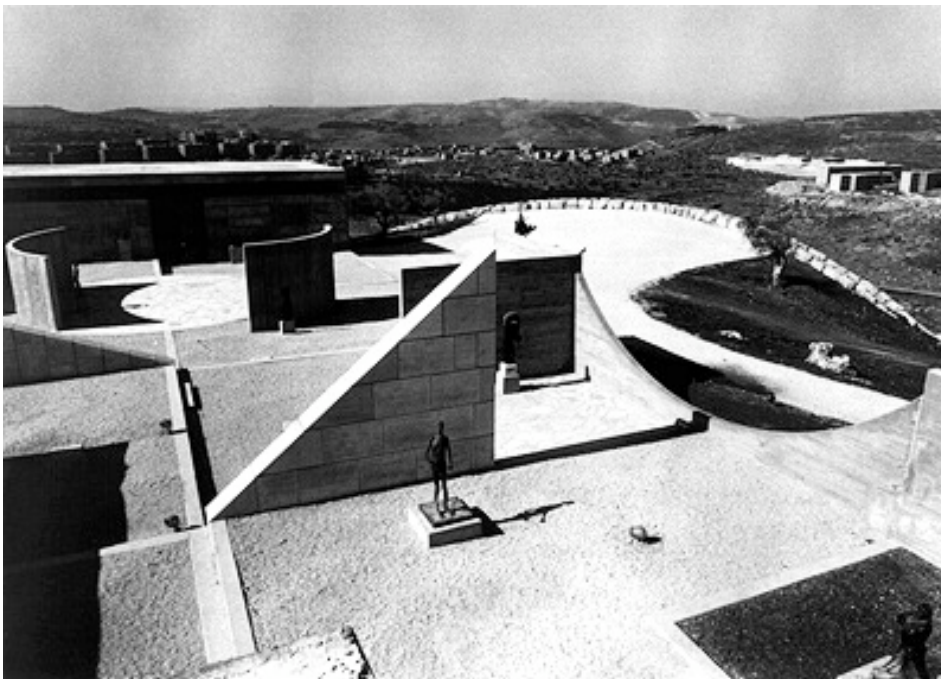


Fig. 26

Isamu Noguchi, Detail of the *Billy Rose Sculpture Garden*, 1960-65. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 27

Isamu Noguchi, *Sunken Garden for Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza*, 1961-64. New York City. (Photo: Isamu Noguchi, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 28a

Isamu Noguchi, *Model of Riverside Drive Playground*, 1961, plaster original. (Photo: Kevin Noble, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.) 105<sup>th</sup> Street is the northern border on the left side of the image, 101<sup>st</sup> at the right. Riverside Drive is at the top, and the West Side Highway would be the border at the image bottom.

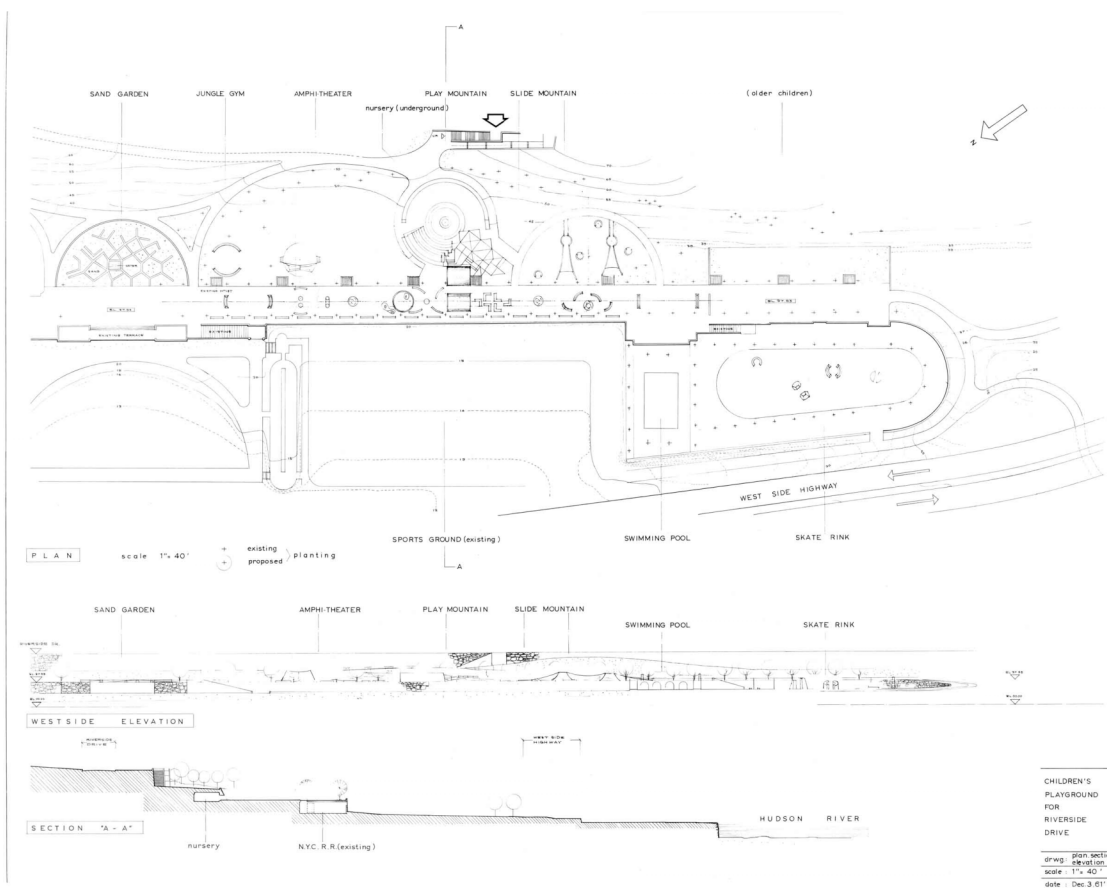


Fig. 28b  
 Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Architectural drawing plan and elevation of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1963. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

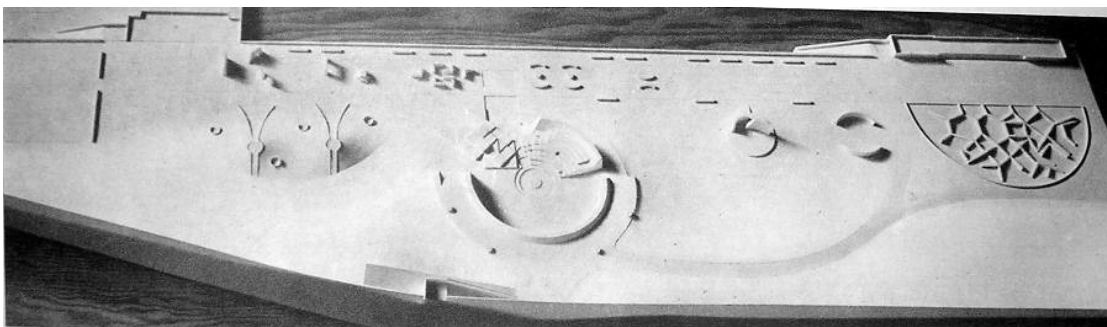
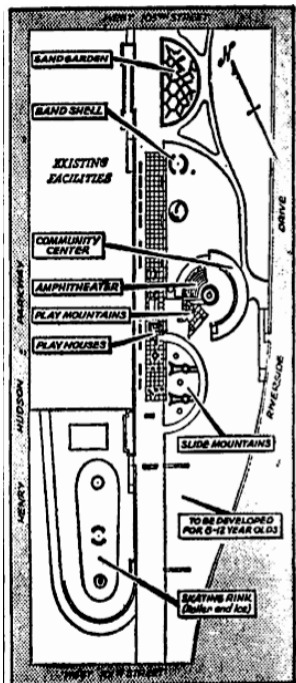


Fig. 29a  
 Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Overview of Model of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1961-62, plaster original. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)  
 105<sup>th</sup> Street is the northern border on the right side of the image, 101<sup>st</sup> Street out of the image frame on the left. Riverside Drive is at the bottom, and the West Side Highway would be the border at the top of the image.



Fig. 29b  
 Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Detail of Model of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1961-62, plaster original. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

The circular shape on the left is the “cup-like sun trap” above the underground nursery. It doubles as an amphitheater, with seating seen at the far, lower left. In the central right area of the image are two “slide mountains.”



The New York Times Oct. 24, 1962

Fig. 30  
 Illustration from Kaplan, Samuel. “Play Area To Fit Contours Of Park.” *New York Times*, 24 October 1962. 42.

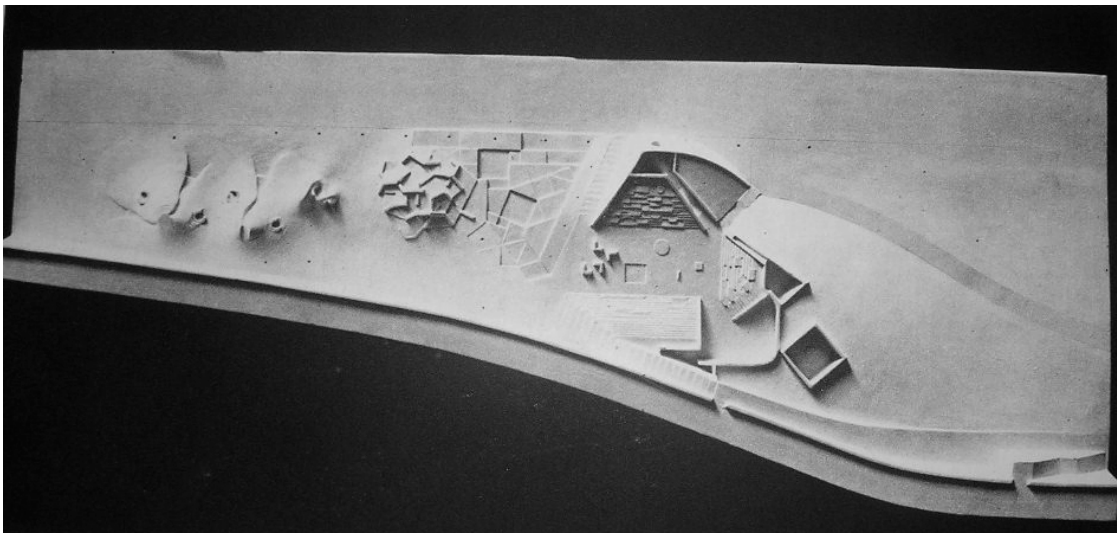


Fig. 31a  
 Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Overview of Model of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1962-63, plaster original. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)  
 View looking west (top): Riverside Drive would be the eastern border at the image bottom, and the West Side Highway would be the border at the image top.

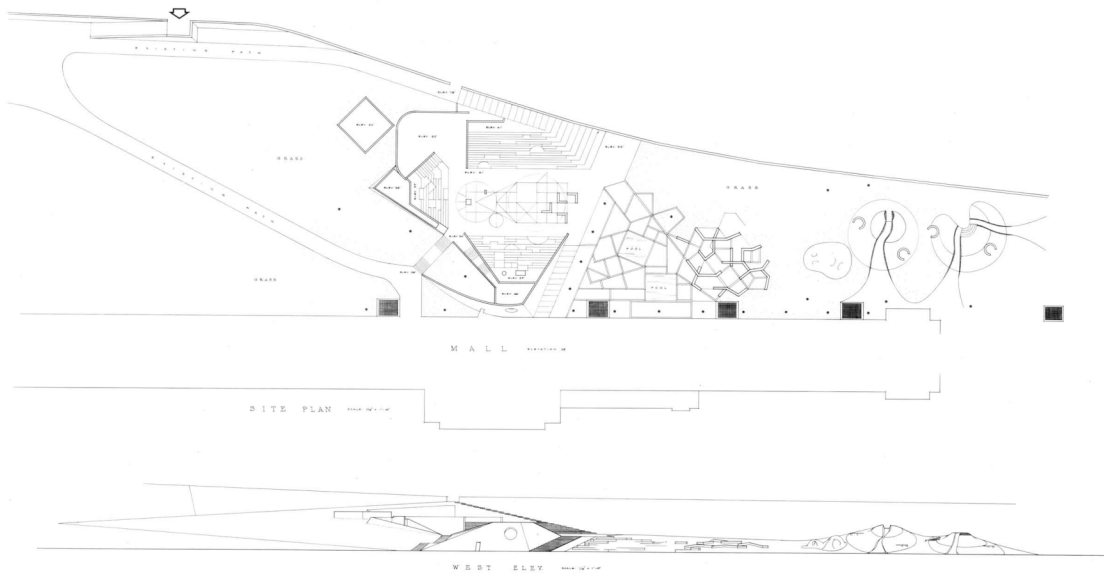


Fig. 31b  
 Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Architectural drawing plan and elevation of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1962-63. Image from Ronner, Heinz, and Sharad Jhaveri. *Louis I. Kahn: Complete Works 1935-1974*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 1994, 184.  
 View looking east (top) towards Riverside Drive boundary.



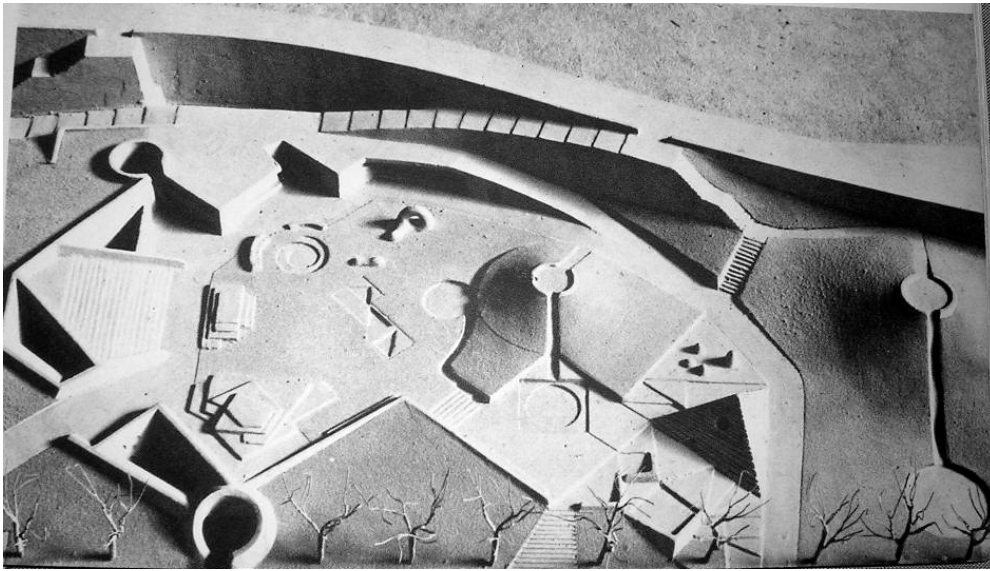


Fig. 32a  
 Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Overview of Model of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1963, plaster original. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)  
 View looking east (top) towards Riverside Drive boundary.

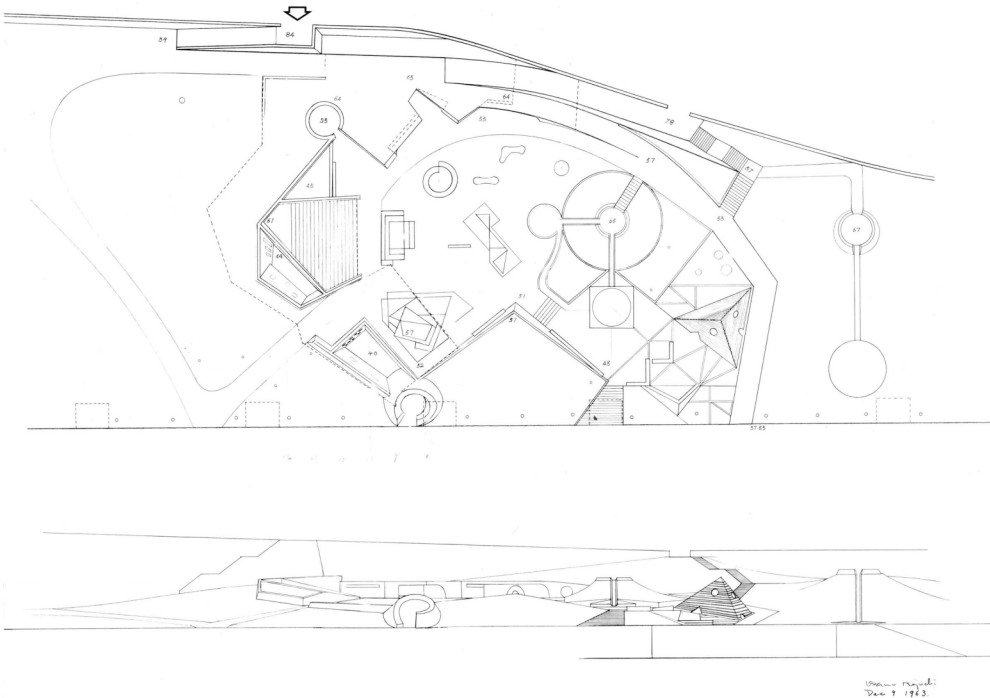


Fig. 32b  
 Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Architectural drawing plan and elevation of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1963. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

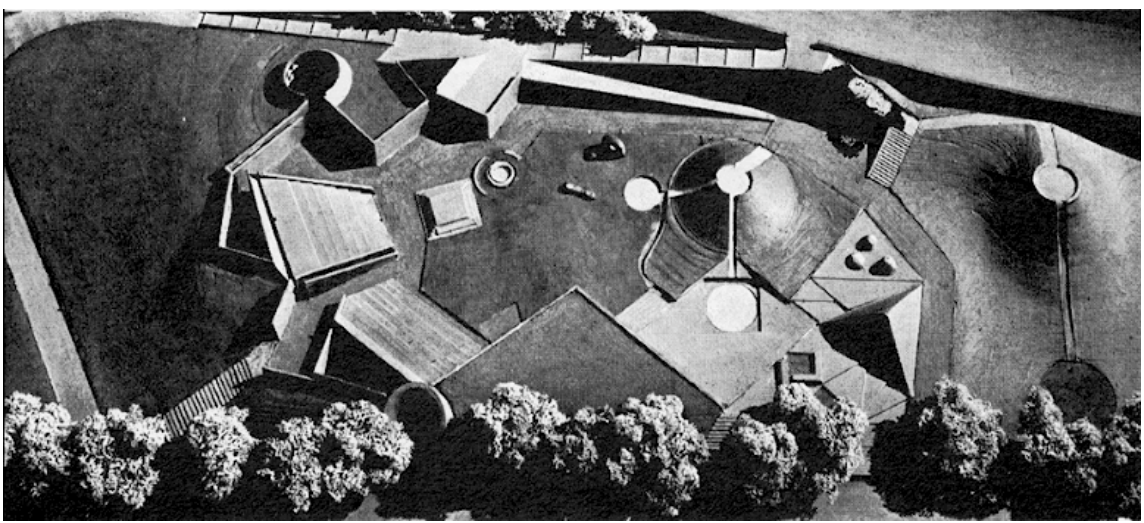


Fig. 33a  
Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Overview of Model of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1963-64, plaster original. Image from Ronner, Heinz, and Sharad Jhaveri. *Louis I. Kahn: Complete Works 1935-1974*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 1994, 185.  
View looking east (top) towards Riverside Drive boundary.

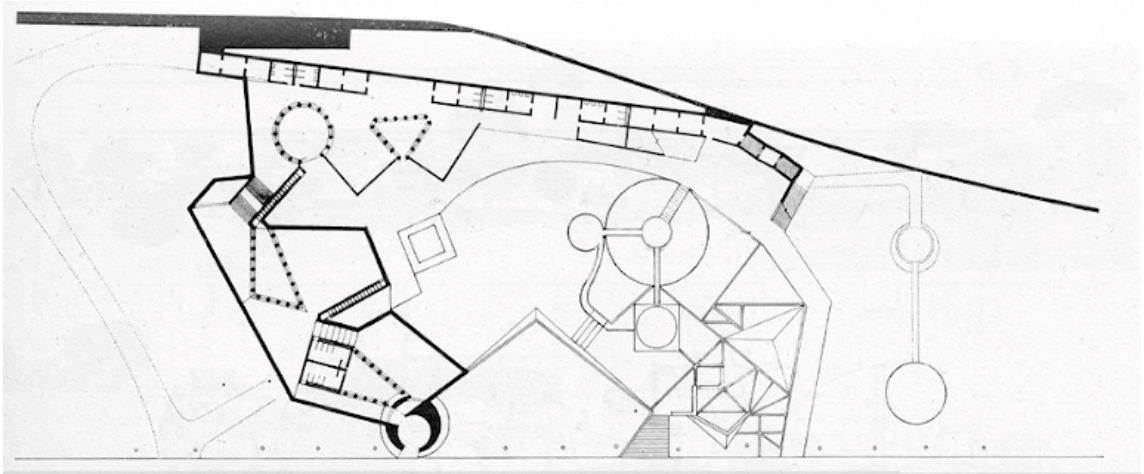


Fig. 33b  
Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Architectural drawing of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1963-64. Image from Ronner, Heinz, and Sharad Jhaveri. *Louis I. Kahn: Complete Works 1935-1974*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 1994, 185.



Fig. 34a  
Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Overview of Model of *Riverside Drive Playground*,  
1964, plaster original. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City,  
New York.)

View looking east (top) towards Riverside Drive boundary.

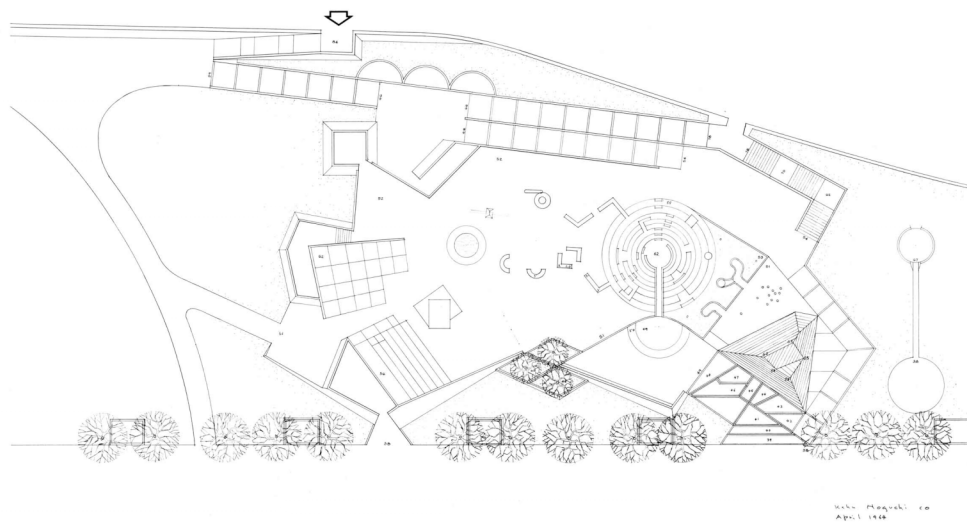


Fig. 34b  
Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Architectural drawing of *Riverside Drive Playground*,  
1964. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

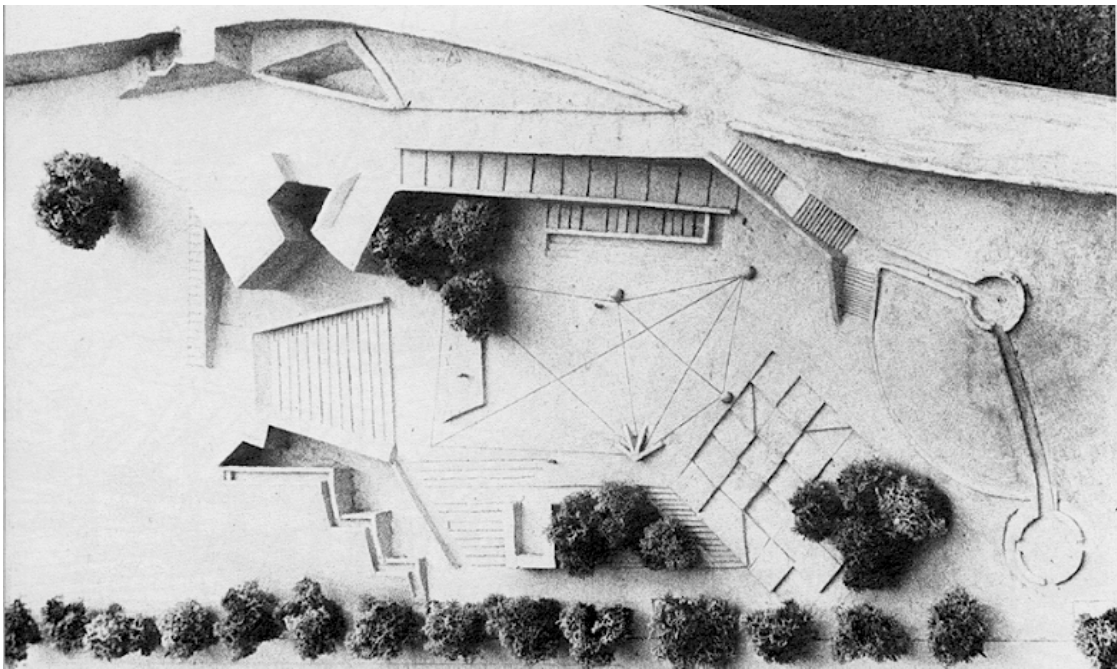


Fig. 35a  
Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Overview of Model of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1964, plaster original. Image from Ronner, Heinz, and Sharad Jhaveri. *Louis I. Kahn: Complete Works 1935-1974*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 1994, 185.  
View looking east (top) towards Riverside Drive boundary.

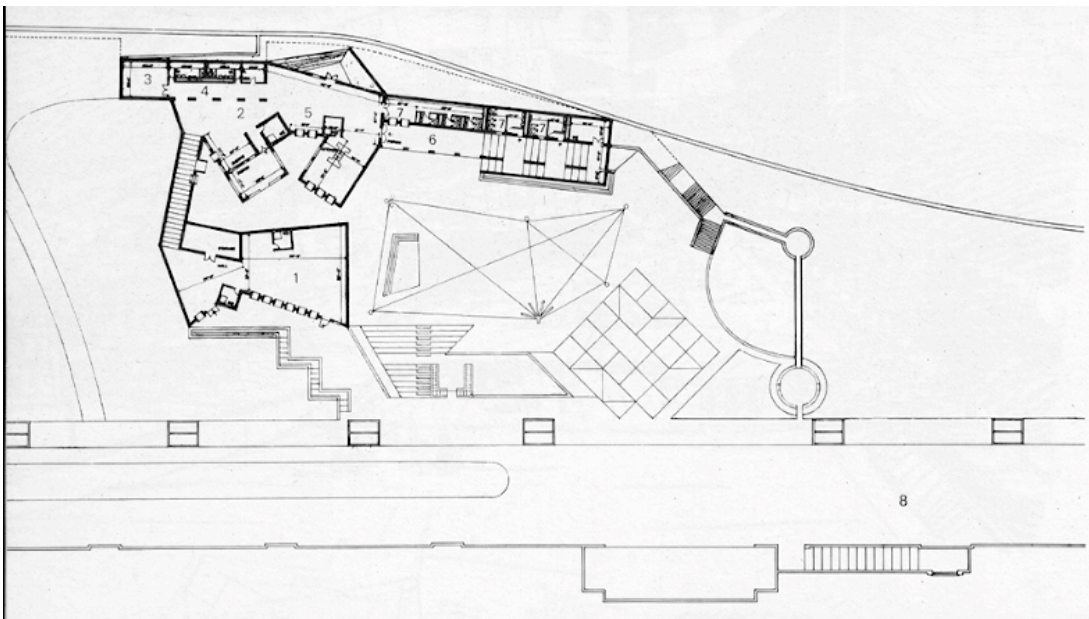


Fig. 35b  
Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Architectural drawing of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1964. Image from Ronner, Heinz, and Sharad Jhaveri. *Louis I. Kahn: Complete Works 1935-1974*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 1994, 185.

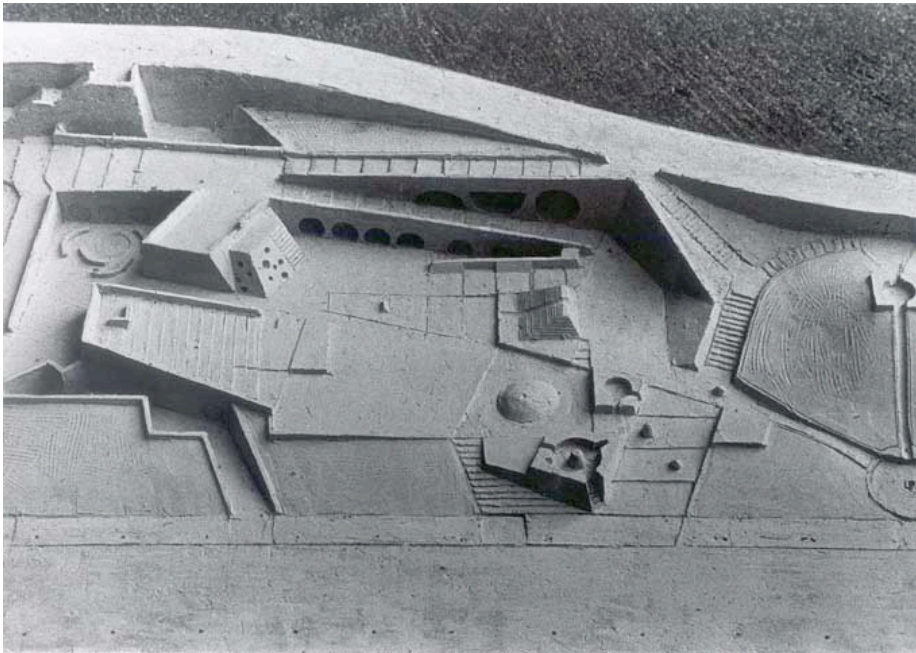


Fig. 36  
Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Overview of Model of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1964-65, plaster original. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)  
View looking east (top) towards Riverside Drive boundary. This first version of the last proposal varied only slightly in the play elements and some of the circular window openings (see below, fig. 37a).



Fig. 37a  
Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Detail of Model of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1964-65, plaster original. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

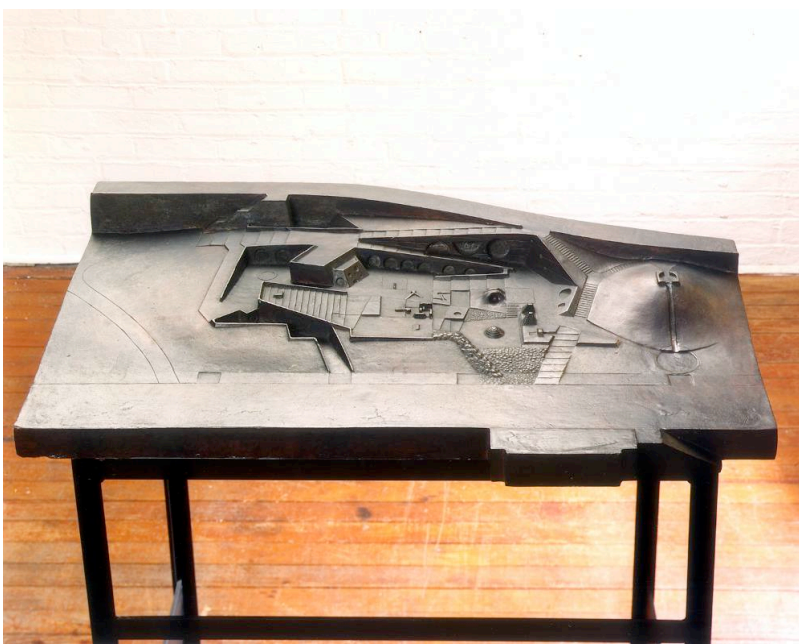


Fig. 37b

Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Model of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1964-65, bronze copy. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

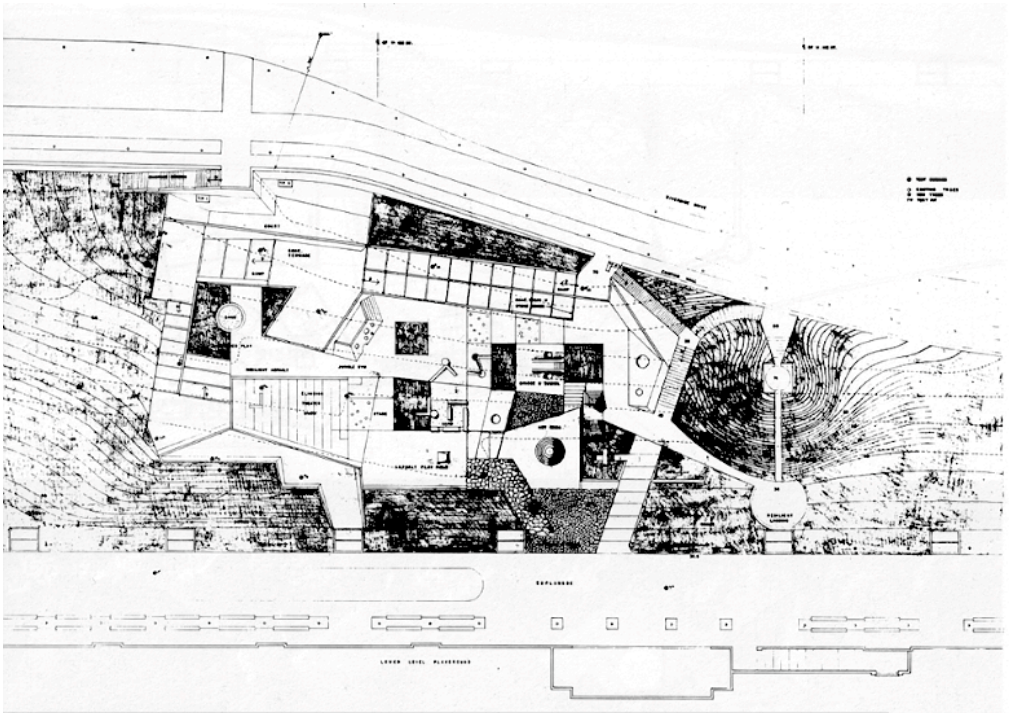


Fig. 37c

Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn, Architectural drawing of *Riverside Drive Playground*, 1964-65. Image from Ronner, Heinz, and Sharad Jhaveri. *Louis I. Kahn: Complete Works 1935-1974*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 1994, 188.



Fig. 38  
Isamu Noguchi, *Black Sun*, 1969, granite. Photographed at Isamu Noguchi's studio in Mure, Shikoku, Japan. Collection of the Seattle Art Museum. (Photo: Michio Noguchi, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 39  
Isamu Noguchi, *Red Cube*, 1968, red painted steel. Marine Midland Bank, 140 Broadway, New York City. (Photo: Michio Noguchi, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

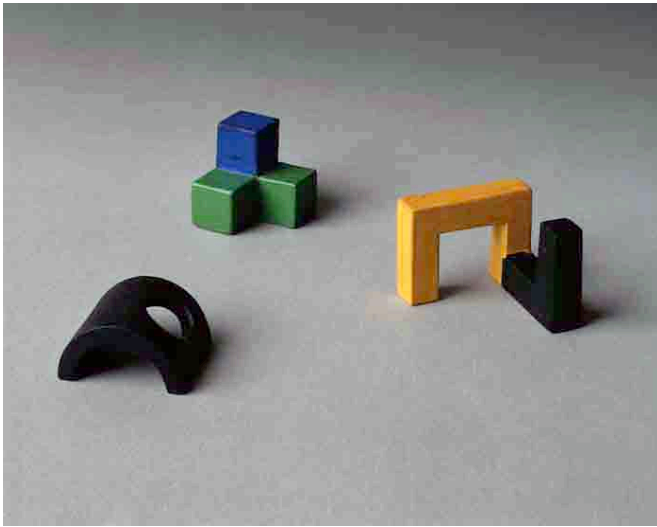


Fig. 40a

Isamu Noguchi, Models of *Play Sculptures*, c.1970. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)

Although there is no record of which designs Noguchi offered to Heckscher, a series of small models executed in the late 1960s or early 70s (possibly even earlier in conjunction with the Riverside project) offer an idea of what Noguchi may have presented to the Commissioner. These models are part of a larger group of play sculptures detailed in the drawing below (fig. 40b, numbers 9, 1, and 5).

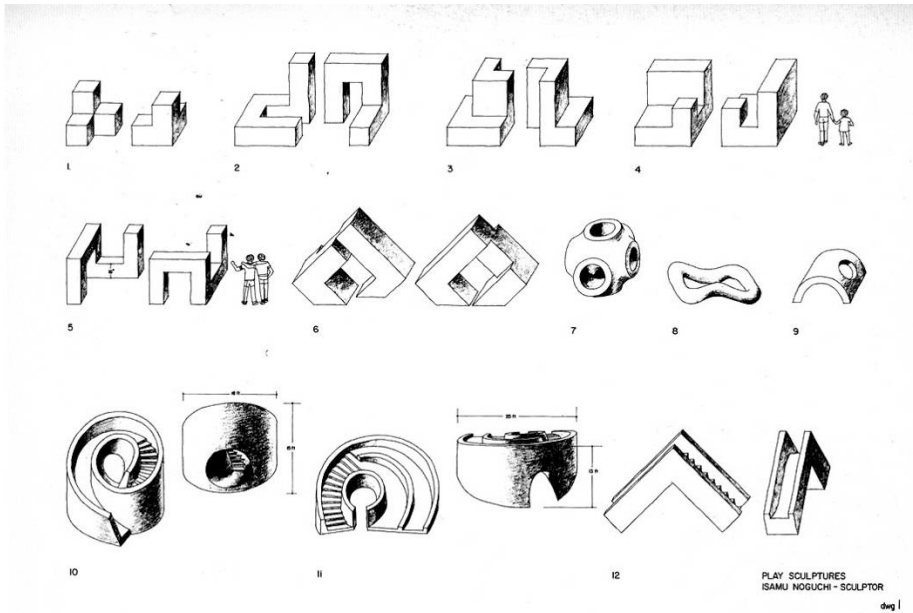


Fig. 40b

Isamu Noguchi, *Play Sculptures Drawing*, c.1970. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)





Fig. 41

Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, 1981. Destroyed. Source: ARTstor ID# S20A\_1\_A\_95.455



Fig. 42

Martha Schwartz, *Untitled*, detail of curved bench and mossy mound, Foley Square facing 290 Broadway East, New York, NY (Federal Plaza). Source: ARTstor ID# LAII-10-06-05

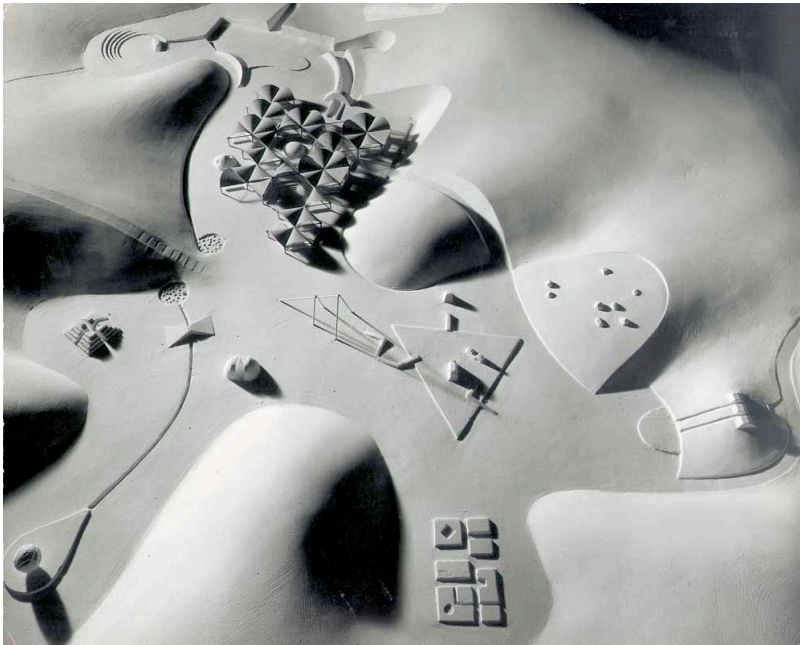


Fig. 43

Isamu Noguchi, Model of *Playground for Kodomo No Kuni*, c. 1965, plaster. (Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)



Fig. 44

Isamu Noguchi, Detail of *Playscapes*, 1975-76. Piedmont Park, Atlanta, Georgia, (Photo: Isamu Noguchi, Courtesy of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.)