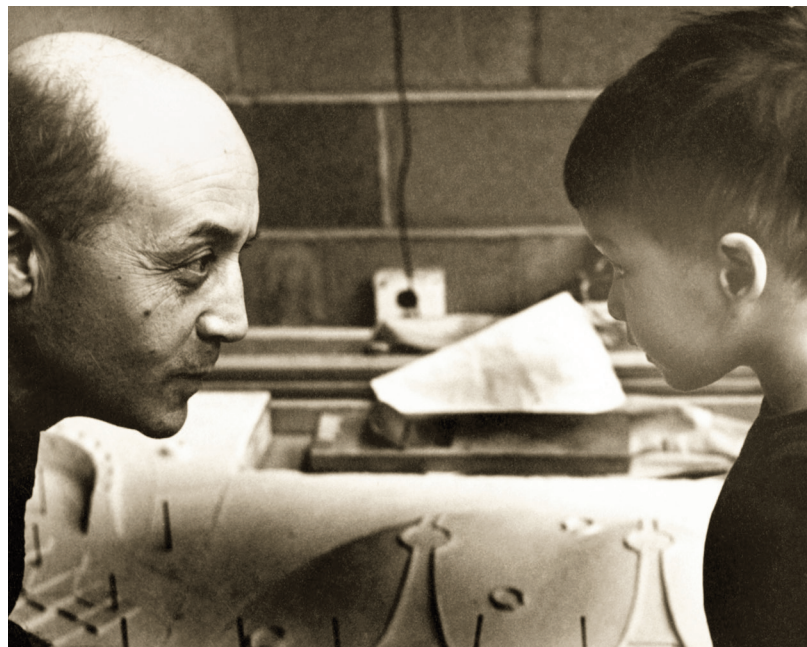




I have always worked with models rather than with plans, that is to say I have always worked three-dimensionally, and that is why I feel that my work has a certain sculptural feeling—that is in relation to the topography.

ISAMU NOGUCHI



AREA 5

Models for Spaces

Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) made, commissioned, and collaborated on dozens of models for spaces throughout his career. This selection highlights projects that are lesser known or for which the models are rarely shown.

AREA 6

In Search of Contoured Playground

Developed in collaboration with Naomi Frangos, architect and Visiting Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, Cornell University, this exhibition investigates Isamu Noguchi's never-built *Contoured Playground* (1941) as theoretical architecture.

COVER

Nicholas Knight, *Model of Contoured Playground*, 2019. Photograph.

LEFT

Noguchi and a young consultant reviewing his plans for Riverside Drive Park Playground, c. 1961–62. The Noguchi Museum Archive.

QUOTE

Isamu Noguchi, "Drafts About a Visual Autobiography," c. 1955. Typescript. The Noguchi Museum Archive.

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The Noguchi Museum

9-01 33rd Road, Long Island City, NY noguchi.org

In Search of Contoured Playground is supported, in part, by a Design History Society Research Exhibition Grant. Exhibitions at The Noguchi Museum are supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the City Council and from the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.



noguchi

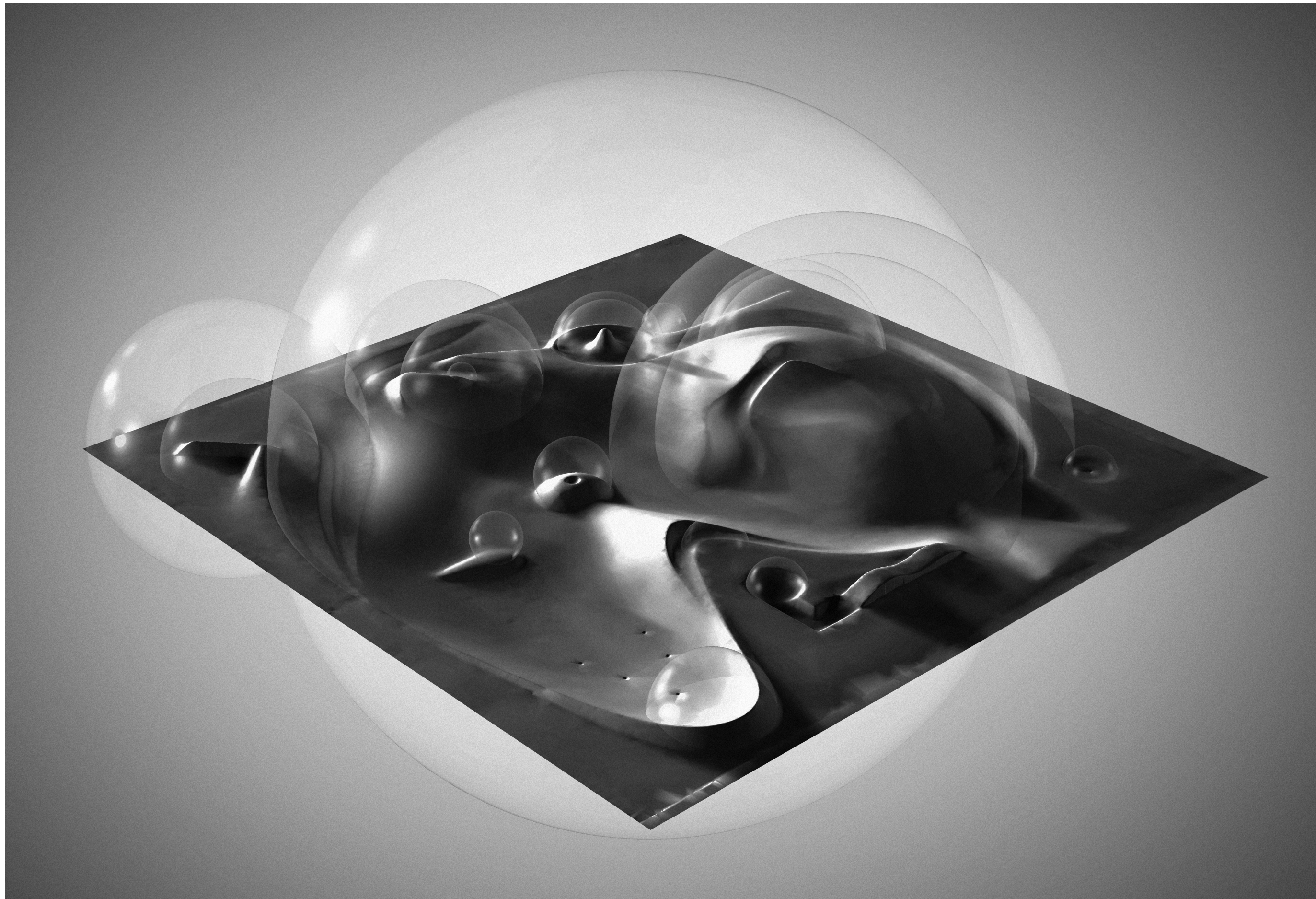
AUG 21, 2019–FEB 2, 2020

AREA 5

MODELS FOR SPACES

AREA 6

IN SEARCH OF CONTOURED PLAYGROUND



ON SCULPTURE, ARCHITECTURE, AND SCALAR PLAY

Noguchi’s aptitude for thinking and working across disciplines helped him to develop a haptic (physically experiential), interscalar intelligence based on material intuition. His ability to localize, situate, and engage time-space relationships in the form of non-site-specific works gave him an architect’s command of scale. The 2 x 2-foot model he made for *Contoured Playground* resembles the square sketch models many architects use as a form of three-dimensional thinking, imprecise in size, scale, and orientation. (The square format resists preconceived orientation.)

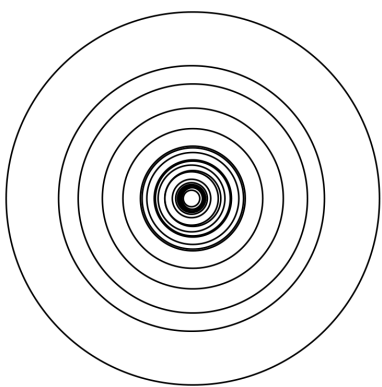
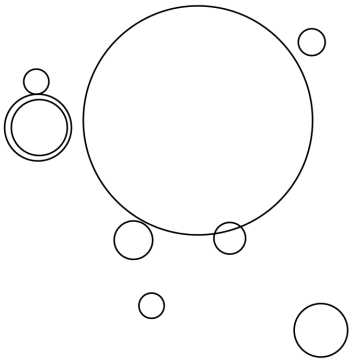
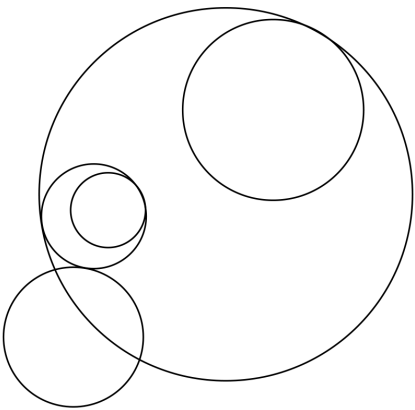
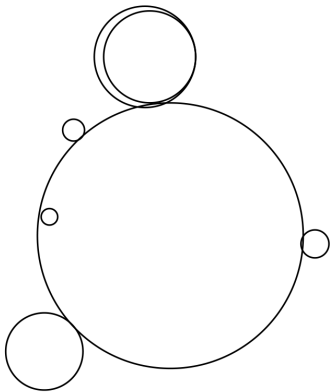
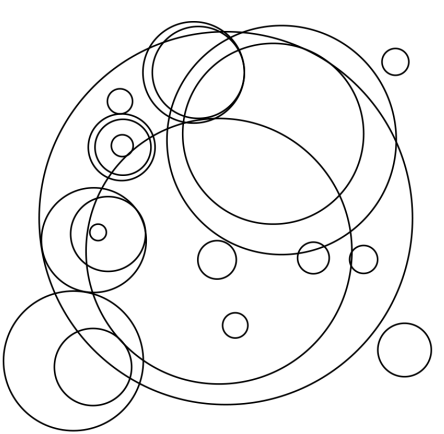
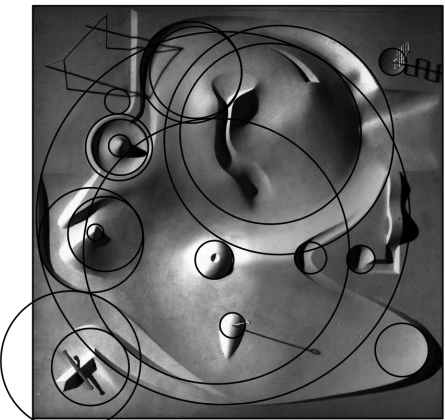
Designed for bodily encounter, physical exploration, and sociocultural use, *Contoured Playground* probes interscalar play as interactive spatial fields. Noguchi’s interscalar thinking cannot be separated from his ideas about movement through space. His mastery at staging experiential performances comes through in the monumental vistas in which he connects the top of mounds to the intimate worlds created by a fountain, a bridge, or a pool; in the mapping of activities in a giant game of hide-and-seek; and in the integration of the scale of the territory with the scale of the body. His pieces of play equipment—swing structure, play tree, climbing pole, and seesaw—are markers in space, similar to those he used in set designs such as for Martha Graham’s *Seraphic Dialogue* (1955), where the circle figures as a prominent shape in setting up a system of spatial relationships at the size of a room.

None of the lines in *Contoured Playground’s* grand sweeping curves, punctuated by rhythmic circular focal points of play, is gratuitous. From a distance, dimples, brows, and wrinkles form an expressive landscape. Up close, Noguchi turns a simple mound into a monument to be climbed and terracing into the remains of a pyramid’s steps at colossal scale. His spaces are systems of scales, designed to continuously alter our perspective. His ground plane shifts perpetually; curves split, branch, and disappear. His topography is dynamically nonorthogonal.

In the model’s interrelated contours, it is evident that Noguchi thought in plan and section at once. Completing each arc as a full circle, a geometric logic is revealed (fig. 1). The frequency of circles of small diameter shows that he prioritized human scale, but the character of the

space also depends on an expanding ripple. Extending these circles into spheres (fig. 2), it is evident how Noguchi united topology (geometric properties and spatial relations of objects with a change of shape or size), topography (surface features), and their cosmic relationships. By creating an orbit of inhabitable spheres of activity, Noguchi connects microcosms of intimate play and macrocosms of social groups through shared boundaries, trajectories, and circumscription. “It’s extremely interesting to me, this whole business of measurement, of place, of situation...”¹ He also cared about “peoples’ place in the world, their sense of belonging,”² juxtaposing remoteness with proximity, nonspecificity of place with deliberate context, and memorized acts of play with newly imagined ones.

Noguchi’s surfaces were forms to be inhabited: “You can say that architecture is sculpture as an experience to be completely experienced not just looking at it ... You’re encased in it.”³ The original 2 x 2-foot model is not made to a precise scale. It is a spatialization whose internal logic, based on identifiable play equipment and earth mounding, seems to argue for a scale of 1 inch = 1 foot, making the overall playground 120 x 120 feet. Geometries and insertion points for the recognizable pieces of steel play equipment differ slightly from one another, suggesting that Noguchi was still negotiating the scale of the final work. Taking a speculative rather than prescriptive attitude toward scale, in this exhibition a 10 x 10-foot scaled-up model (generated from a 3D digital scan) hovers at eye level and is set against a 1:1 scale silhouette of the topography perceived as if standing in the middle of the actual playground. The aim of these juxtapositions is to engage us in simultaneously varying scalar bodily projections. An aerial view of Central Park at 1:1000 provides the overall context of the natural setting *Contoured Playground* was intended to join as a discoverable landform, allowing us to envision what might have been. As contemporary urbanism continues to move away from situational, prescribed spaces in favor of open-ended ones that offer flexibility and the unexpected, it is easy to understand why, though never realized in New York City, Noguchi’s earth modulations have come to exert such a strong influence on the direction of playgrounds around the world.



THIS PAGE FIG. 1 *Geometric Logic of Scale in the Cosmic Life of Contoured Playground.*

FACING PAGE FIG. 2 *System of Spheres in the Cosmic Life of Contoured Playground.*

Illustrations by Naomi Frangos.

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

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

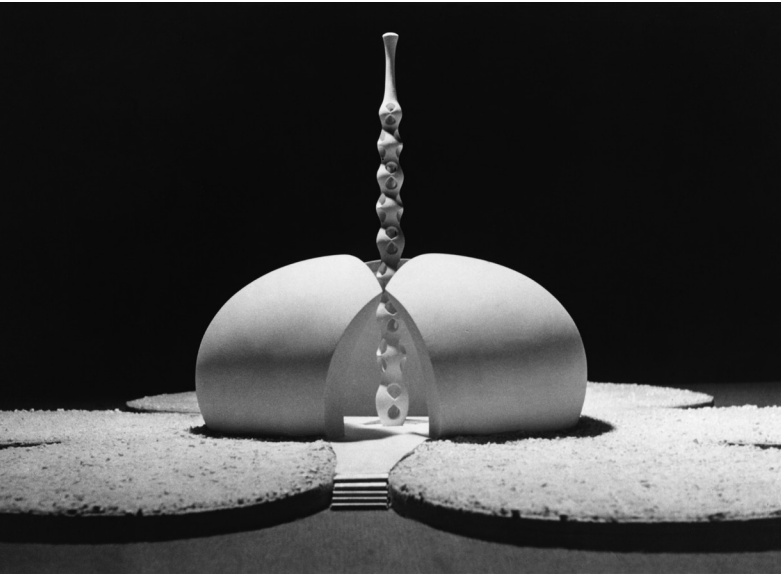
Special thanks to Central Park Conservancy, Design History Society, Michael Langjahr, and Hammad Ahsan.

MODELS FOR SPACES

AREA 5

In his career Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) made, commissioned, and collaborated on models for many spaces: actual and theoretical. Some, such as the plaster model that he produced in 1933 for *Play Mountain* (unrealized), an all-in-one environment of leisure for a block in New York City, are catalogues of ideas for shaping our environment “into communal usefulness.”¹ Others, like his numerous stone table sculptures, are conceptual and elliptical—what he called imaginary landscapes. Working between these poles, following his conviction that sculpture should be interactively spatial and civic, Noguchi planned spaces based on gardens, playgrounds, courtyards, plazas, landscapes, parks, memorials, and theater sets. He would later characterize his versions of these paradigms of public life as “compositions in topological space,”² trying to account, it would seem, for their often ambiguous in-betweenness.

These lesser-known or rarely shown designs have been installed to emphasize how Noguchi used models to shape physical experiences. The core concept of the *Memorial to Buddha* (1957, unrealized), to take just one example, was that spotting it from afar, it would look like a distant blossom—as it might to a bee scanning the horizon. Drawn, like that bee, to approach and enter the interior, viewers would have been moved—pollinated, you might say—to participate in a ritual “of universal birth and awakening.”³ The lobed, 70-foot-tall spire at the center of the semispherical space formed by the blossom’s three giant concrete petals—part of the machinery of its allure—appears to be a giant pistil. A pollinator certainly might mistake it for such. But *Nelumbo nucifera*—India’s national flower and a Buddhist and Hindu symbol of divinity, purity, and detachment from earthly concern—does not have a projecting pistil. Paradoxically, Indian lotus is actually famous for its fast-growing, mud-bound, tubular root system—a feature that, in religious contexts, symbolizes the earthly muck we are supposed to aspire to transcend. It is from this subterranean, and therefore somewhat spiritually suspect, structure that Noguchi fashioned an organic endless column, pointing to heaven. Following the bee metaphor to its natural conclusion, Noguchi meant for the design to clearly resolve in the shape of a giant lotus blossom only from the air (looking out the window of a plane on approach to the Delhi airport): floating amidst six enormous leaves on the surface of the earth.



TOP SHELF
Model for United Nations Sculpture (unrealized)
1952
Plaster

MIDDLE SHELF
Model for Dome of the Rock
c. 1968
Plaster

Model for Ziggurat
c. 1968
Plaster

Model for Double Red Mountain
1969
Plaster


Model for Untitled
c. 1983–84
Plaster

Study models (2)
c. 1966
Plaster

LOWER SHELF
Study model for Sunken Garden for Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
New Haven, CT
c. 1960–64
Plaster, wood

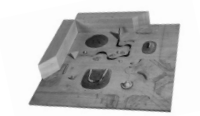
MURAL
Isamu Noguchi with Lever Brothers Building Courtyard Model
New York, NY (unrealized)
1952
Photo: Charles Uht

Memorial to Buddha (Study for a Memorial on the 2500th Anniversary of Buddha's Paranamirvana)
New Delhi, India (unrealized)
1957 (model partially reconstructed 1978)
Bronze, plaster, wood
Refabricated with the assistance of Susumu Sakaguchi


FLOOR
Model for Gardens for Connecticut General Life Insurance Company
Bloomfield, CT
1956–57 (reconstructed 1999–2000)
Wood, sandpaper, paint
Fabricated by AT Architects
Gift of AT Architects


Model for Sacred Rocks of Kukaniloko
Oahu, HI (unrealized)
1976
Foamcore, Styrofoam, plaster, paint


Model for Heaven (Tengoku)
Sogetsu Flower Arranging School, Tokyo
c. 1977–78
Wood


Model for California Scenario
Costa Mesa, CA
c. 1980–82
Wood, plasticine
Fabricated by Fuller & Sadao, P.C.

¹ “Isamu Noguchi,” Marie Harriman Gallery, 1935. The Noguchi Museum Archive.
² Isamu Noguchi, “My Sculpture,” in *Isamu Noguchi* (Tokyo: Minami Gallery, 1973).
³ Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968; Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2015), 168.
⁴ Ibid., 176.

All works are by Isamu Noguchi and Collection of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

IN SEARCH OF CONTOURED PLAYGROUND

AREA 6

Model for Contoured Playground, with original equipment attachments, 1941
Plaster, steel
Photo: F.S. Lincoln
Reproduced with the permission of the Special Collections Library, the Pennsylvania State University Libraries

Model for Contoured Playground
1941 (cast 1963)
Bronze

Play Sculpture (Tree) for Contoured Playground
1941 (enlarged and fabricated 2019)
Steel

Model for Contoured Playground
1941 (enlarged and fabricated 2018)
Foam

Play Sculpture (Tree) for Contoured Playground
1941 (fabricated 2019)
Aluminum

Play Sculpture (Swing) for Contoured Playground
1941 (fabricated 2019)
Aluminum

Play Sculpture (Pole) for Contoured Playground
1941 (fabricated 2019)
Aluminum

Play Sculpture (SeeSaw) for Contoured Playground
1941 (fabricated 2019)
MDF

WALLS
Drawing of Central Park at 1:1000
2019
Archival paper on Sintra

Drawing of a contour line through Contoured Playground at 1:1
Paint



Contoured Playground is essentially a softened, preschool child-sized, arcadian reappraisal of *Play Mountain* (1933), the first play space Noguchi proposed for New York City. It was designed in 1941 in response to an informal challenge issued by the New York City Department of Parks for a completely safe playground. His solution was a compact natural landscape composed entirely of “earth modulations”⁴—with hills, swales, terracing, springs, pools, and running water offering a varied terrain for free, open-ended play. With the onset of World War II, consideration of public works projects was suspended. After the war, the Department of Parks gave the plan a hearing, but it was never built.

Noguchi’s ideas about play, particularly his commitment to nondirective spaces patterned on nature, are now generally viewed as seminal in an actively developing field. However, because so few of his playgrounds were executed in his lifetime, those ideas have remained practically and experientially inaccessible outside of the design professions. Staring at the 2-foot-square bronze cast of *Contoured Playground*, it is difficult to imagine, much less inhabit, his spaces of the mind. Noguchi treated the bronze casts of his models—shorn of equipment, their real-world reference points homogenized—as separate works. In its final state *Contoured Playground* is deliberately abstract, a scaleless microcosm that shares more in common with imaginary landscapes such as *Another Land* (1968) in Area 3, a chunk of topographical otherness, than with the models from which they originally derived. Noguchi made things even more complicated by purposefully working between scales, trying to bring spatial ambiguity to both individual elements of a design and an overall scheme. Balancing usability and metaphysical sublimity through subtle modulations of scale, form, and user assumptions, he would eventually have made the choices, in fitting the plan to a specific site, that would have created a Noguchi.

What we have done here is to undertake a deconstruction of *Contoured Playground*, as if it were a piece of theoretical architecture, in order to plot a few more points in the gap between the entirely abstract plane it has become and the inhabitable space it was meant to be.

DAKIN HART, SENIOR CURATOR, THE NOGUCHI MUSEUM