MANIPULATING LANDSCAPE
PANUWICH WONGPAITOONPIYA
Erosion, 1969 / Noguchi Museum Collection
Swimming Pool for Joseph von Sternberg, 1935 / Noguchi Museum Collection
Riverside Playground, 1961 / Noguchi Museum Collection
UNESCO Gardens, 1958 / Dwells: 5 Public Landscapes of Isamu Noguchi
Noguchi hoped to interest Moses in Play Mountain, his vision for a new kind of playground. It would contain no swing sets, sandboxes, or seesaws—and no cues for how to play on it. Instead, the sculptor’s sweeping, tiered pyramid would be a place for undirected play, a place where the imagination could run wild. No other artist in America was designing playgrounds like this one.

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

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