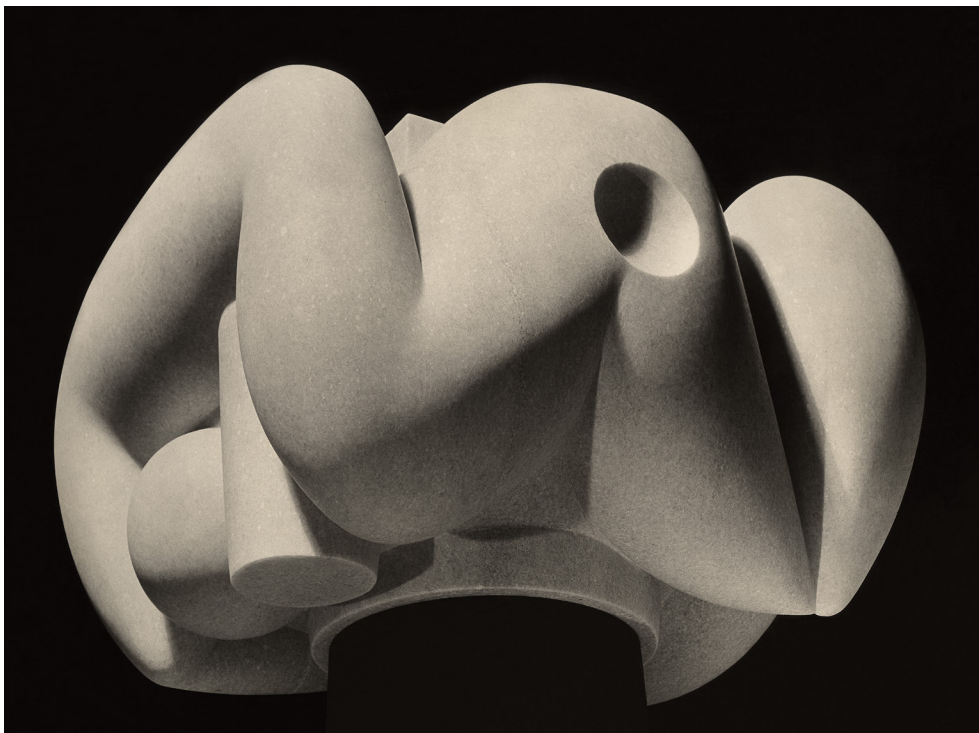


## Noguchi Museum Presents *Noguchi: Useless Architecture*

Exhibition explores ways that Isamu Noguchi used formal vocabularies  
of architecture to reimagine a social purpose for sculpture

May 19, 2021 – May 8, 2022



Isamu Noguchi, *Capital*, 1939. Georgia marble. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Gift of Jeanne Reynal. Photo: F. S. Lincoln. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 01533. ©INFGM / ARS

New York, NY (April 14, 2021) —The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum announces *Noguchi: Useless Architecture*, an exhibition of around fifty works mostly drawn from the Museum’s collection and occupying its second floor galleries. In 1949 and again in 1960, Isamu Noguchi visited India’s Jantar Mantar in Delhi and Jaipur, two of the original five campuses of astronomical devices created on a grand architectural scale by the 18th-century Maharaja Jai Singh II. Noguchi described the conglomeration of instruments at each site—so large as to be more recognizable as monumental sculpture or architecture than as functioning devices—as “useless architecture, useful sculpture.” The exhibition was directly inspired by this phrase.



Photograph by Isamu Noguchi of Samrat Yantra, Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, India, 1950s.  
The Noguchi Museum Archives, 08447.3. ©INFGM / ARS

“Jai Singh’s structures are mystical sculptures that define space,” Isamu Noguchi is quoted in a brief essay accompanying his photographs of the Jantar Mantar in “Astronomical City,” *Portfolio: A Magazine for the Graphic Arts*, 1, no. 3 (1951): 115. “You might call them useless architecture or useful sculpture. They imply a use—much sculpture does that. Whether or not they were intended so, Jai Singh’s works have turned out to be an expression of wanting to be one with the universe. They contain an appreciation of measured time and the shortness of life and the vastness of the universe.”

In this context, the phrase “useless architecture, useful sculpture” represents an alternative to an architecture that is alienating in its totalitarian self-containment, and to sculpture irrelevant to life and time’s passage. It speaks to Noguchi’s ambition to sculpt spaces free from the specific responsibilities of architecture and to create sculptures imbued with more than purely theoretical, aesthetic purpose.

## EXHIBITION

Arranged in thematic installations – Ruins, Theater Space, Architectural Metaphors, Terraces and Panorama, Postmodern Akari, Ends – the exhibition explores how Noguchi drew on architecture to supercharge his efforts to make sculpture civic, communal, and environmental. He had a contentious but phenomenally productive relationship with architects and architecture (see, for example, the digital feature *Ten Architects*, [noguchi.org/ten-architects](http://noguchi.org/ten-architects)). He stated in an interview in 1957, “I always prefer gardens, because I can work there without pressure from anyone. You know how selfishly architects claim the most important role in a building project for themselves. They see our contribution as secondary and they limit our freedom. Which is why landscaping a garden is a solution of sorts.” (Catherine Frantzeskakis,

“The American-Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi talks about Greece,” *Zygos* no. 17 [March 1957]: 20.) Focusing on often overlooked public spaces adjacent to architecture such as courtyards, patios, atria, and landscaping, he was able to create timeless, humanistic spaces in a way that would not have been possible had he needed to assume architecture’s programmatic responsibilities.

### Ruins

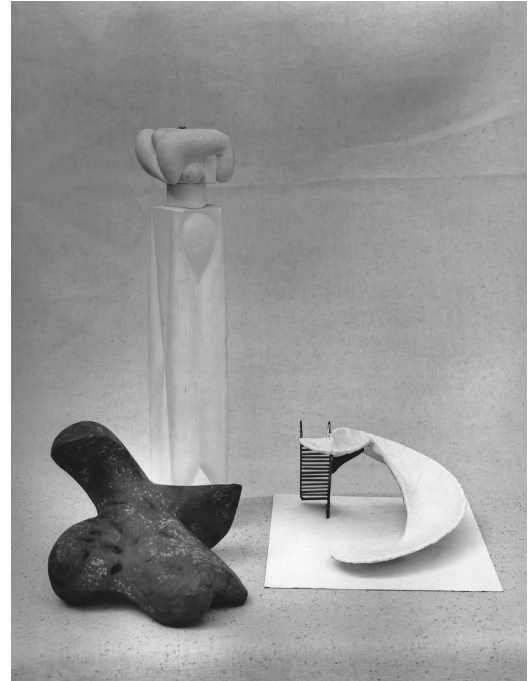
An assemblage of abstract sculptures that imply ancient worlds, such as *Ziggurat* (c. 1968), *Wrapped Figure* (1962), *Sentry* (1958), and *Small Torso* (1958–62), evokes an alternate, modern, futuristic Delphi; a temple complex-like agglomeration of semi-ruins. *Capital* (1939), a special loan from The Museum of Modern Art (gifted to MoMA by Noguchi’s longtime friend and sometime collaborator, artist Jeanne Reynal), imagines what a biomorphic, surrealist order of architecture might look like if developed in the manner of the classical orders represented by Ionic, Doric, and Corinthian capitals.

### Theater Space

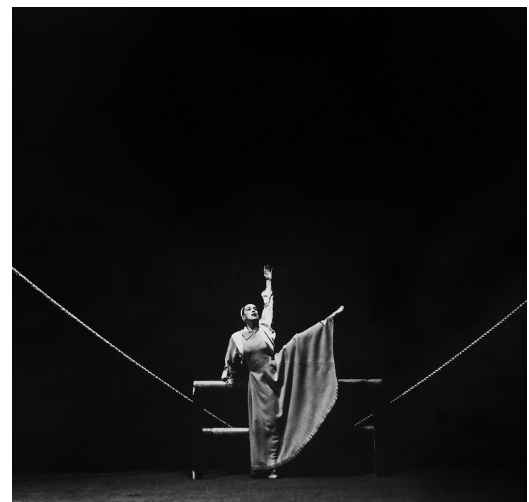
Noguchi’s first design for Martha Graham, for her ballet *Frontier* (1935), employed a single length of rope to “throw the entire volume of air straight over the heads of the audience” (*Isamu Noguchi: A Sculptor’s World*: 125) and create “an outburst into space and at the same time an influx toward infinity.” (*The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum*: 212). In all subsequent sets for Graham—who wanted structure not scenery—Noguchi distilled environments into objects in order to create imaginary spaces. In *Seraphic Dialogue* (1955) he captured the whole majesty of France in a simple drawing of Chartres cathedral in space, while *Embattled Garden* (1958) both literalizes and analogizes life in and outside the precinct of Eden.

### Architectural Metaphors

Noguchi did not believe that it was the job of sculpture to decorate buildings, but was extremely interested in deconstructing and appropriating architecture’s space defining authority. In sculptures such as *The Opening* (1970), *Roof Frame* (1974–75), and *Shaft & Root* (1982–83), Noguchi explores material combinations, structural systems, and architectural features almost



Isamu Noguchi, *Capital* (model with column), *Maquette for a Slide*, and an unknown piece, c. 1939. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 01534. ©INFGM / ARS



Martha Graham performing *Frontier*, 1935. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 01508. ©INFGM / ARS





From left: Isamu Noguchi, *Riverside Playground: Play Terrace Study*, c. 1961 (cast 1963). Bronze. 10030. Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza, *Element Study*, c. 1961–64. Plaster, paint. 00496. Photos: Kevin Noble. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society

as an architectural studio would in doing the basic research required to prepare for a major building project. He also greatly expands the architectural palette by returning, as he always did, to nature, the “better craftsman.”

### Terraces and Panorama

Terraces were one of Noguchi’s simplest and most powerful semi-architectural play concepts. (All they do is to change your perspective.) A viewing platform derived from the form of a 1961 maquette for Isamu Noguchi and Louis Kahn’s unrealized Riverside Playground offers a panoramic overlook onto various small maquettes such as those for play sculptures (c. 1960s), an element study for Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza (c. 1961–64), and a model for *Pylon* for Detroit’s Philip A. Hart Plaza (c. 1972–79).

### Postmodern Akari

For Isamu Noguchi’s *Space of Akari and Stone* at Yurakucho Art Forum, Tokyo (organized by the Seibu Museum) in 1985, collaborating architect Arata Isozaki worked from a cryptic poem that Noguchi gave him to inspire and guide a juxtaposition of contrasts through a series of miniature environments. In the Museum’s original Akari light sculpture gallery space known as Area 13, an installation directly inspired by one of Isozaki’s exhibition settings demonstrates the versatile ability of Noguchi’s lanterns to shape space. The warmth and humanizing power of Akari is emphasized by placing them in various geometric enclosures and display niches of chain-link and corrugated metal.



Space of *Akari and Stone*, Yurakucho Art Forum, Tokyo (organized by Seibu Museum, Tokyo), February 9–20, 1985. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 02898. ©INFGM / ARS

## Ends

*End Pieces* (1974), a closed house of cards made from massive waste slabs of black granite, is temporarily relocated from the Museum's garden and installed in a square interior gallery. In spring 2022, *End Pieces* will be incorporated into architect-designer Miwako Kurashima's peripatetic, microcosmic tea space project *\*folding cosmos* (an announcement with confirmed details is forthcoming later in 2021).

## LOCATION

The Noguchi Museum  
9-01 33rd Road (at Vernon Boulevard)  
Long Island City, NY 11106

Open Weds–Sun, 11 am–6 pm,  
by advance reservation: [noguchi.org/visit](http://noguchi.org/visit)

Media Contacts / Press Visit Requests:  
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## SUPPORT

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## ABOUT THE NOGUCHI MUSEUM

Founded in 1985 by Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), one of the leading sculptors and designers of the twentieth century, The Noguchi Museum was the first museum in America to be established, designed, and installed by a living artist to show their own work. Widely viewed as among the artist's greatest achievements, the Museum comprises ten indoor galleries in a converted factory building, as well as an acclaimed outdoor sculpture garden. Since its founding, it has served as an international hub for Noguchi research and appreciation. In addition to managing the artist's archives and catalogue raisonné, the Museum exhibits a comprehensive selection of sculpture, models for public projects and gardens, dance sets, and his Akari light sculptures. Provocative installations drawn from the permanent collection, together with diverse special exhibitions related to Noguchi and the milieu in which he worked, offer a rich, contextualized view of Noguchi's art and illuminate his enduring influence as a category-defying, multicultural, cross-disciplinary innovator. **[noguchi.org](http://noguchi.org)** | **[@noguchimuseum](https://www.instagram.com/noguchimuseum)**

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Isamu Noguchi, *End Pieces*, 1974. Swedish granite.  
Photo: George Hirose. 10130. ©The Isamu Noguchi  
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Society

*Noguchi: Useless Architecture*

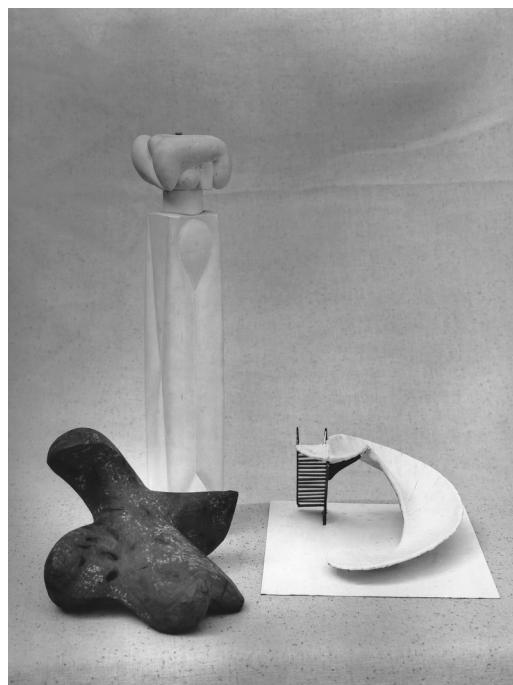
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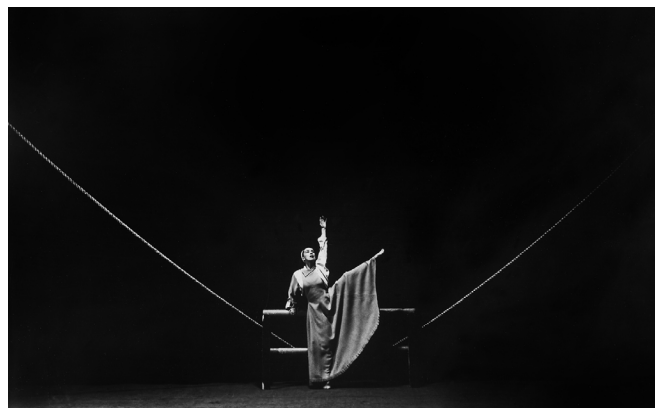
Isamu Noguchi, *Capital*, 1939. Georgia marble. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Jeanne Reynal. Photo: F. S. Lincoln. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 01533. ©INFGM / ARS



Isamu Noguchi, *Capital* (model with column), *Maquette for a Slide*, and an unknown piece, c. 1939. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 01534. ©INFGM / ARS



Photograph by Isamu Noguchi of Samrat Yantra, Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, India, 1950s. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 08447.3. ©INFGM / ARS



Martha Graham performing *Frontier*, 1935. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 01508. ©INFGM / ARS



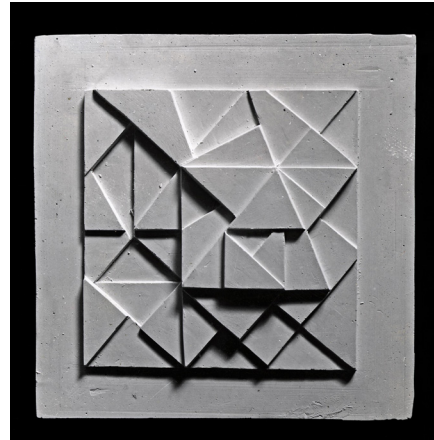
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Isamu Noguchi, *Riverside Playground: Play Terrace Study*, c. 1961 (cast 1963). Bronze. Photo: Kevin Noble. 10030. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



Isamu Noguchi, *Riverside Playground: Play Terrace Study*, c. 1961. Plaster. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 01952. ©INFGM / ARS



Isamu Noguchi, *Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza, Element Study*, c. 1961–64. Plaster, paint. Photo: Kevin Noble. 00496. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



Isamu Noguchi and Arata Isozaki, *Space of Akari and Stone*, Yurakucho Art Forum, Tokyo (organized by Seibu Museum, Tokyo), February 9–20, 1985. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 02898. ©INFGM / ARS

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Isamu Noguchi, *End Pieces*, 1974. Swedish granite. Photo: George Hirose. 10130. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



Isamu Noguchi, *Riverside Playground, Amphitheater Study*, 1961–62. Plasticine, plywood. Photo: Kevin Noble. 10024. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



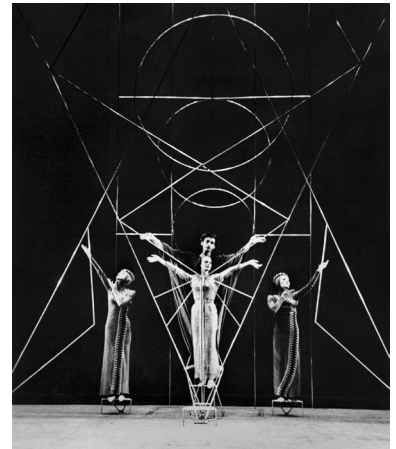
Isamu Noguchi, *Capital #2*, 1942. Georgia marble. Private collection. Photo: Michael Tropea. 00052. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



Isamu Noguchi, *Ziggurat* (detail), c. 1968. Seravezza marble. Photo: Nicholas Knight. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



Isamu Noguchi, *Roof Frame*, 1974–75. Stainless steel. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 12293. ©INFGM / ARS



Martha Graham Dance Company performing *Seraphic Dialogue*, 1955. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 06757. ©INFGM / ARS



Isamu Noguchi, *Shaft & Root*, 1982–83. Hot-dipped galvanized steel. Photo: Genevieve Hanson. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



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## Press Images



Photograph by Isamu Noguchi of Temple of Apollo at Delphi, Greece, 1950s. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 04391. ©INFGM / ARS



Isamu Noguchi, *Wrapped Figure*, 1962. Botticino marble. 00556. Photo: Kevin Noble. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



Isamu Noguchi, *Figure Portion of Composition for Arrivals Building, Idlewild Airport*, 1958. Greek marble. Photo: Nicholas Knight. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



Isamu Noguchi, *Model for Slide Mantra*, 1966. Plaster. Photo: Kevin Noble. 10081. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



Isamu Noguchi, *Akari UF4-31N*, 1984. Paper, bamboo, metal, electrical components. Photo: Kevin Noble. 150982. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



Isamu Noguchi, *Secret*, 1982–83. Hot-dipped galvanized steel. Photo: Kevin Noble. 10230. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society



Isamu Noguchi, *Round Square Space*, 1970. Indian granite, pine base. Photo: Kevin Noble. 10113. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society