Romancing the Stone

The Cullen Sculpture Garden by Isamu Noguchi

Andrew Bartle

The people of Houston have cause to celebrate a recent embellishment. The city's most elegant institution, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, has acquired a new building, a work of cautious yet romantic sensibility in the form of an outdoor public sculpture garden designed by Isamu Noguchi. The Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden, built at a cost of $3.2 million, is a maze of concrete and stone-clad walls, earth mounds, paving, and trees sited across from the museum at the corner of Bissonnet and Montrose on an acre of park land owned by the City of Houston. At present, it is the repository for 18 pieces of sculpture by 12 artists, two of which are from the late 19th century, the remainder from the 20th; eventually the garden may accommodate as many as 30 pieces. Completed in April, it has already been the scene of concerts, receptions, and other events and is open daily between 9 AM and 10 PM. One hesitates to say that the project is really finished, for besides sculpture yet to be added, the plant materials will require time to mature. As the trees fill out and the proportion of sunlight to shadow becomes more even, the problem of excessive glare will fade and the extravagant wealth of vegetation will give the city a shady corner of not a little interest.

Isamu Noguchi, a remarkable and prolific artist now 81 years of age, is known primarily as a sculptor, although he has designed a number of other gardens, stage sets, furniture, and industrial objects as well as this year's American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Noguchi began his career as an assistant to Gutzon Borglum in the carving of Mount Rushmore and subsequently worked in the studio of Constantin Brancusi. He has been producing designs using landscape elements for more than 50 years, the most recent of which is a 32-acre bayfront park planned for Miami. The choice of Noguchi for the museum's sculpture garden is credited to Alice Pratt Brown who, after a minor epiphany at the Billy Rose Sculpture Garden, which Noguchi designed for the Israel Museum in Jerusalem (1960-1965), proposed that he be retained. Noguchi began the Houston project in 1978, working as the design progressed with the architect Shojo Sadao.

A longtime associate who, like Noguchi, had also collaborated on projects with Buckminster Fuller.

The idea of a sculpture garden for the museum can be traced back at least 30 years to a rather elegant proposal devised for the south lawn in 1958 by David Haid in the office of Mies van der Rohe, architect of Cullinan Hall (1958) and the Brown Pavilion (1972), the two principal additions to the original neo-classical building by William Ward Watkin (1924). Haid's scheme, offered as an alternative to a more domestic landscaping plan prepared by Thomas Church under the auspices of the Houston Garden Club, would have paved over much of the truncated triangle south of the museum with a fan-like grid to accommodate the display of sculpture. This pristine setting, penetrated only by trees already on the grounds, was bounded at one end by an arcing, ornamental pool and at the other by a broad platform ascending to the museum. This conception still seems commendable for the activity it would have imparted to an honorific space, unceremoniously subordinated by the relocation of the museum's principal entry to the north with the completion of Cullinan Hall. It also might have established a semblance of urbanity on a comparatively precious and visible piece of Houston real estate, facing onto the traffic ellipse at the confluence of Main Street and Montrose Boulevard, opposite the entrance to Hermann Park.

A more recent project that merits mention...
were three schemes prepared in the 1970s by the landscape architects M. Paul Friedberg and Partners of New York for a site that included the area finally set aside for the Calder Sculpture Garden. As matter of wishful thinking, Friedberg's schemes encompassed not only the rectangular plot that now forms the sculpture garden, but also a significant if narrow strip of land excerpted from a parking lot belonging to the First Presbyterian Church and extending east to Main Street, thus enabling the scheme to track the full expanse of the Mies van der Rohe front of the museum. Although the museum initiated negotiations to obtain the plan for $1,000,000, there was no willingness to permit Noguchi full artistic license, particularly in regard to adjustments on site and expenditures for additional materials, plant and mineral.

The process by which Noguchi realizes projects of this kind runs contrary to conventional building practice and requires a great deal of on-site manipulation, modification, and even reconstruction. Here delicate changes of levels and contours are central to the desired effect of eye-level perceptions and to the sum total of the physical experience of the visitor. Because the work is premised on these and the most immediate tactile sensations, as well as the deep appreciation of abstraction, the hands-on adjustments dictated by Noguchi's well-practiced sense of a direct, primary expression of his sensibility, the authentication of a model, and construction drawings that are more in the nature of fine notes than a finished design.

This "touch-feely" creative process is part of the inheritance of the romantic tradition that elevates sensibility above reason. Noguchi's work is experienced through a series of episodic perceptions within a continuous flowing, "liquid" space. This type of landscape design belongs to a tradition that begins in 18th-century England, the origin of which was much influenced by artistic ideas of the Orient. The great gardens of that period in England out-perform in nature the link with the natural elements, directing enormous effort and expense at intensifying the landscape to approximate distinctions of untamed nature. Noguchi's garden, however, more closely resembles French urban intermediate parks. In addition, the English gardens at a diminutive scale. Parc Monceau, for example, displays a similar density of every element from the central axis to the form of ruins, although its classical elements convey a familiarity absent in Noguchi's work.

What draws Noguchi to this romantic garden tradition is an affinity for the direct, (seemingly) immediate experience of natural form. A related idea informs surrealism, another ancestral spirit of this work. Among the surrealist devices employed by Noguchi are radical juxtapositions: a sense of dislocation and the presence of images and themes intended to penetrate directly into the subconscious. The English garden and surrealism share an interest in unmediated experience; one of nature, the other of the self. The surrealists attempt to recreate the fragmentation of experience analogous to urban life, while in romantic garden the ever-present sense of ruins suggests the all-powerful process of time. Both insert an international baroque. In both, divergent formal strategies: the garden as a sacred precinct protected by a wall and the garden as a lyrical floor of exaggerated natural landscape. The work can be viewed summarily as the result of an interpretation of the "new look" of nature: its departure and, indeed, its resolution at the external edge is active and agitated.

Model, Riverside Park Playground, New York, 1960-1965, Isamu Noguchi (Photo courtesy The Isamu Noguchi Foundation)

If one looks for a body of work to stand for the 20th century attitude in garden design, these three sources are virtually always present. From Parque Guell in Barcelona by Antoni Gaudi, to Le Corbusier's Trench of Consideration at Chandigarh, to Antoine Grumbach's competition entry for La Villette, one consistently observes elements of spatial continuity, juxtaposition, a sense of dislocation, and also an evocation or intensification of mythic form. The primary identifying feature of most modernist gardens is the transformation of the landscape into something that strongly contrasts with the existing natural features. This breaks with the tradition of European garden history, which exploited the capability of existing landscape features (as manifested, for example, in Italian Renaissance gardens, where hillsides and streams became terraces and caves bored in French woods). Two vistas were delineated to create images of control over large flat plains.

The Cullen Sculpture Garden adheres to the modernist tradition in its self-contained manipulations of the site and plane to isolate the work from its immediate surroundings rather than a reinforcement of existing landscape features. Noguchi's first published landscape designs, essayed more than 50 years ago, are themselves precocious experiments in earth art, a field more recently amplified by the work of Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer. Put Mountain and Monument to the Plow, both of 1933, are significant innovations that redefine distinct elements of untamed nature. Noguchi's garden, however, more closely resembles French urban intermediate parks. In addition, the English gardens at a diminutive scale. Parc Monceau, for example, displays a similar density of every element from the central axis to the form of ruins, although its classical elements convey a familiarity absent in Noguchi's work.

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The body of the garden is a more abstracted extrapolation of this approach. Incomplete and interrupted geometries, mammoth fragments of walls (some supported by foundations 27 feet below grade), and raw building materials contribute to a sense that this place has something more to it than is immediately apparent. The call to the imagination is present in the construction that such a compositional method and psychological sensibility could survive.

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Remember Houston
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Houston Mastaba, Project for 1,250,000 Oil Drums, 1974, Christo, artist.
Drawing-collage, pencil, crayons, colored crayons, enamel paint, photostat and map, 30" x 22" (76 x 56 cm.) (Photo by Eeva-Iiikki, courtesy of the artist)

constructed of 1.25 million oil drums. Luis Jiménez and Richard Haas both deployed wit and irony in the public monuments they have executed in Houston. Jiménez's Vaquero (1979), at Moody Park, exploits lurid colors and action-packed composition to impress itself on viewers; Haas's mural Houston (1983), at Town and Country Mall, is American Scene retro, updated with astronauts and traffic jams. Recent submissions to two design competitions — that of Ben Nicholson to the Sesquicentennial Park Design Competition, and that of Peter D. Waldman and Christopher Genik to the "Transformations" charrette sponsored by Yousuf Karsh Architects Forum at Diverse Works — although architectural in nature, suggest new ways of imagining and installing Houston that extract, reinterpret, and objectify local historical and cultural patterns.

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The decision to create a self-reflective entity rather than use the site and program to build upon salient features of the program that builds and regional patterns runs counter to present architectural tendencies. It is not hard to imagine a design that attempts to weave together the Glassell School, The Museum of Fine Arts, and the Contemporary Arts Museum (Gunnar Birkerts, 1972) directly across Montrose. One wonders if even a modest effort to establish some spatial or material relationship to context might have added some richness to the final realization. It is, however, ill-advised to make contextual relationships the sole criterion for evaluating a work of design. Once faced with the intention to create an independent object, it must be considered as such, knowing that the success of urban interventions of any sort derives largely from intrinsic qualities that may influence subsequent development by example.

A more serious deficiency in this project lies in the realization of its internal components, which are sometimes at cross purposes with the intention of creating a counter landscape. The use of closely clipped St. Augustine grass to cover the bent planes and sensuous mounds of earth suggests a golf course green that contrasts unfavorably with Noguchi's initial proposal to cover these surfaces with monkey grass, a less ruly and more giving material. The hyper-articulation of each element in the garden and the over-emphatic separation of all materials used in construction from one another is counter productive as well, depriving the composition of a subdued, accepting fabric at appropriate points along the way. The stone objects comprising numerous ground-level lighting fixtures and even trash receptacles prove ill-chosen subjects for monumentalization and wind up crowding the garden so as to distract from the sculptures themselves. At the other extreme, the banality of the tall, stock lighting fixtures is similarly disconcerting, if less obtrusive. Except for special events, the only provision made for seating (apart from the grassy knolls) are austere, permanently placed concrete benches resembling precast girder — a measure of control that precludes the casual placement of individual chairs. One element that escapes this syndrome of either rigid conformity or indifference is the mot juste of the metal grate at the base of many of the trees which looks marvelous and neither ostentatious nor undecorated. In all, the avid if occasionally selective adherence to this heavy reductionist palette does more to hinder the presentation of the sculpture than aid it. Because the range of constructed elements is so limited, there is no method of adjusting for objects of a smaller scale, as is apparent in the awkwardness of the presentation of the Robert Graham pieces, and which might discourage further presentation of intimate works. But on the whole, the works of art appear fairly comfortable, perhaps because the collection is such a familiar gathering of works by all the expected artists that it may offer no real test of the space's flexibility.

The passage of time will allow one to evaluate the degree of success or failure of this counter landscape. The inherent problem of the whole strategy is that the "world" here might be only a stage and perhaps an overly determined one at that, despite the greater allure promised once the plants mature. One wonders, though, if the Cullen Sculpture Garden's provocative, slightly surrealistic edge might not also fade, and whether its continual call for perceptual and psychological dislocation and awakening will endure. On these accounts there can be little certainty, for like all romances, its essence cannot be fully managed or even anticipated.

Notes
1 Thanks to Terrell James and Denise Turner for their insightful critical observations.
2 Sadly, one of Houston's most gifted young artists, the painter and sculptor Julian R. Murch, was not retained to execute any public works of monumental art locally.

Coffee Then
And Now

Coffee beans came West with the people who settled Texas. Setters roasted, ground and brewed their coffee over campfires, and at open hearths. Hardy pioneers gave way to urban cowfolk, and fresh roasted coffee to grounds in a can.

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