

Top: Model, Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden, Isamu Noguchi. Below: View looking north



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 bauble, 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 Shoji Sadao,



Preliminary garden study for The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1954, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, architect

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

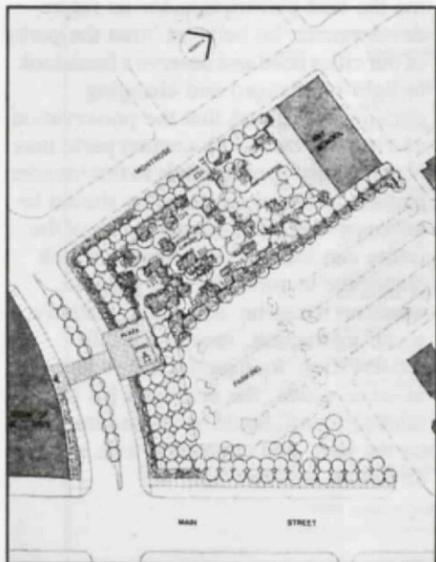
The idea of a sculpture garden for the museum can be traced back at least 30 years to a rather elegant proposal devised for the south lawn in 1958 by David Haid in the office of Mies van der Rohe, architect of Cullinan Hall (1958) and the Brown Pavilion (1972), the two principal

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 Cullen 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 parking lot in its entirety, the transaction was ultimately deemed too costly and abandoned. With it, the prospect of a cohesively landscaped edge along Bissonnet from Montrose to Main was deferred, perhaps indefinitely, withholding the amenity of a balanced and unified street, trees on one side and the museum on the other. Two of Friedberg's schemes also proposed extending the area of the garden to include the south half of the block now occupied by the Glassell School of the museum – an augmentation that would have extended its influence along Montrose while securing a somewhat ampler site overall. Viewed in this light, the limited purview accorded Noguchi's completed project may have discouraged any concerted effort to make the design less insular and more responsive to the urban possibilities of its context.

Noguchi's initial idea, inspired by a visit to Houston during a flood, was to make the garden an island. This charming and probably impractical scheme was rejected, as was a subsequent and related proposal for a sunken garden. The notion of the garden as a walled enclosure followed, and may have corresponded more nearly to the museum's prior expectations, which were reportedly imbued by a fondness among members of its board of trustees for the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York by Philip Johnson (1953). The walled scheme was modified both as a matter of course in design development and in response to community reaction. The sculptor wished to enlarge the site as much as possible, and a 28 percent expansion was accomplished through various negotiations with the City of Houston and the First Presbyterian Church to eliminate the two adjacent minor streets, thereby enabling the garden to connect to the Glassell School and to gain an entrance almost aligned with the main door of the museum across Bissonnet. The design was presented to the client in a series of models and at a crucial point was exhibited publicly. This



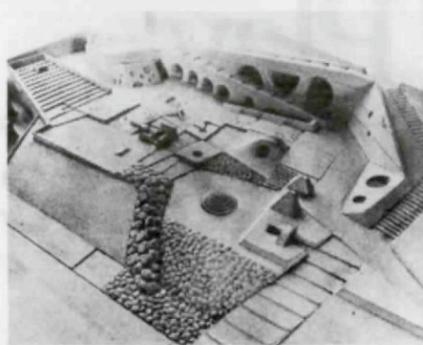
Site plan, sculpture garden for The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, M. Paul Friedberg and Partners, architects

latter display, and reaction to it by the Museum Area Municipal Association among others, led to a regrettable alteration in the design in which the walled enclosure became fragmented and replaced at points by bermed outcroppings, an erosion that tended to make the scheme leaky and more diffuse without effecting any fundamental change in its relation to its surroundings. As is often the case, this community intervention was apparently motivated more by a reaction to the aesthetics of the proposal than the defense of any rational set of design criteria calculated to serve the civic good. The museum's indulgence in this instance was matched by its willingness to permit Noguchi full artistic license, particularly with respect 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 cumulative visual experience of the visitor. Because the work is premised on these and the most immediate tactile sensations, as well as the conceptual appreciation of abstraction, the hands-on adjustments dictated by Noguchi's well-practiced eye become a primary expression of his sensibility, the authentication of a model, and construction drawings that are more in the nature of final notes than a finished design.

This "touchy-feely" creative process is part of the inheritance of the romantic tradition that elevates sensibility above reason. Noguchi's garden 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 nature in the dramatic composition of natural elements, directing enormous effort and expense at intensifying the landscape to approximate the magic of untouched nature. Noguchi's garden, however, more closely resembles French urban interpretations of English gardens at a diminutive scale. Parc Monceau, for example, displays a similar density of events and tectonic modulation in 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) unmediated 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 that enforce 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 surrealist attempts to recreate the fragmentation of experience analogous to urban life, while in romantic gardens the evocative use of ruins suggests the all-powerful process of time. Both are sources for the topographic disjunctions and incomplete, disconnected structures that populate Noguchi's garden. A final source of influence appears to be an interest in primitive art, in the potent fascination that mythic artifacts and structures of lost civilizations exert as vehicles for the unmediated experience of form.

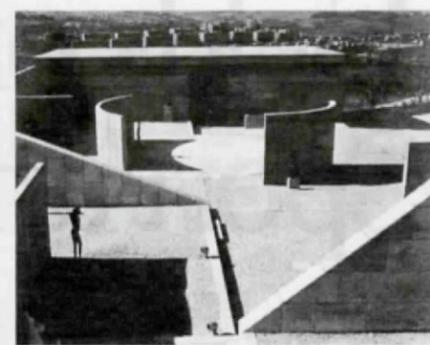


Model, Riverside Park Playground, New York, 1960-1965, Isamu Noguchi (Photo courtesy The Isamu Noguchi Foundation)

If one looks for a body of work to stand for a 20th-century attitude in garden design, these three sources are virtually always present. From Parque Guell in Barcelona by Antoni Gaudí, 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 intimation 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 cascades; and in French gardens, where vistas were delineated to create images of control over large flat plains).

The Cullen Sculpture Garden adheres to the modernist tradition in its self-conscious manipulation of the ground plane to isolate the work from its immediate surroundings rather than a reinforcement of existing positive 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. *Play Mountain* and *Monument to the Plow*, both of 1933, are significant innovations that constitute distinctly self-conscious manipulations of landscape forms, influenced by prehistoric landscape forms, as is also the case with another work of considerable charm, *Sculpture to Be Seen From Mars* (1947). A decidedly surrealist tinge is evident in projects for the Jefferson Memorial Park, St. Louis (1945, with Edward Durell Stone) and the United Nations Playground, New York (1952). Subsequent commissions for corporations such as the Chase Manhattan Bank and IBM produced a body of work that is much more Oriental in feeling and less relevant to the Cullen Sculpture Garden. In the 1960s Noguchi returned to a more "chthonic" style with the Billy Rose Sculpture Garden in Jerusalem and the Levy Playground proposal for Riverside Park, done with Louis I. Kahn (1961-1964). These are mature and powerful works that are at once extremely fragmented but unified, strongly contrasting with existing contexts, but also respectful of them.

The Cullen Sculpture Garden is a more complex and tightly wound object, yet softer and more delicate in feeling. It poses an internal tension between two divergent formal strategies: the garden as a sacred precinct protected by a wall and the garden as a lyrical, flowing, exaggerated natural landscape. The work can be viewed summarily as the result of an overlapping of these two points of departure and, indeed, their resolution at the external edge is active and agitated. It



Billy Rose Sculpture Garden, Jerusalem, 1960-1965, Isamu Noguchi (Photo courtesy The Isamu Noguchi Foundation)

is the initial perception of the perimeter walls that forces visitors to suspend conventional expectations of architectural production and consider the prospect as a ruin. The whirling spatial currents of the interior induce the rise and fall, retreat and advance, of the exterior walls, placing the project apart from the public realm. This ruined countenance suggests a certain temporal notation and the poignant, irresistible power of nature. Thus conflicting formal strategies are held together by the introduction of the illusion of time.

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 had some earlier function, now mysterious, that although lost, inspires awe for both the place and its artifacts. This arch-romantic sensibility is made presentable by the immaculate condition of the exposed construction. The glossy finishes prevent any chance of shock or surprise. Perhaps it is only through this degree of abstraction and the tremendous effort to rationalize the image of the construction that such a compositional method and sensibility could survive.

The internal organization is calculated to give a sense of spatial and psychological dislocation within its diminutive compass. A reassuring re-orientation occurs at the approximate center of the space so that visitors can gauge the area to be traversed, though conscious of the complexity and the probability of surprise. The passages through the space offer no hierarchical sequence; rather they appear as a series of episodes often contrived to produce perceptual distortion and ambiguities of scale. Diagonal walls and bent, warped, and curved surfaces suggest movement analogous to the actual procession of visitors. The emphasis on virtual and actual movement generates a sense of spatial continuity that is flowing and (to borrow a word from Robert Slutzky) "aqueous." This liquid, feminine impression is interrupted and violated by vigorous upright projections, most dramatically at a point near the center of the geographic whole, that is perceived shortly after entering from Bissonnet. An aggressive, lunging granite monolith rises to pierce the virtual flow in a ritual image of fertilization that gives the garden life. Noguchi insisted that this particular element be changed from its original incarnation in concrete to the more precious granite after a visit to the site. The non-specific, mythic reference of this form is characteristic of late modernism: a cross-cultural, but paradoxically private, expression intended to provide a direct and unmediated experience of Form authorized by an affinity to ante-deluvian artifacts occurring in a self-consciously discrete and complete "world" created by the artist.

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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"x22" (76 x 56 cm.) (Photo by Eeva-Inkeri, courtesy of the artist)

constructed of 1.25 million oil drums. Luís Jiménez and Richard Haas both deploy 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 Young Architects Forum at Diverse Works — although architectural in nature, suggest new ways of imagining and imaging Houston that extract, reinterpret, and objectify local historical and cultural patterns.

Romancing the Stone

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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 proximate built environment or 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 close-cropped 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 concealing 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



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Vaquero, Moody Park, 1979, Luís Jiménez, sculptor

Manipulating witty, ironic imagery to attract popular attention and developing procedures for translating patterns of life into artifacts are two possible ways to make the necessary connection between the community and objects intended to memorialize it. It is clear that monuments, if they are to stimulate Houstonians into resisting amnesia and remembering their city, must confront the public with itself, make the city visible as a community, and inspire the forms of public life that will perpetuate civic recognition and memory. ■

Notes

- 1 Thanks to Terrell James and Drexel Turner for their insightful critical observations.
- 2 Sadly, one of Houston's most gifted young artists, the painter and sculptor Julian R. Muench, was not retained to execute any public works of monumental art locally.
- 3 On the symbolic potency of the Alamo, see Susan Prendergast Schoelwer with Tom Gläser, *Alamo Images, Changing Perceptions of a Texas Experience*, Dallas: DeGolyer Library and Southern Methodist University Press, 1985.

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 girders — 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 unconsidered. 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 surrealist 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. ■

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