ISAMU NOGUCHI:
THE MODERNIZATION OF JAPANESE GARDEN DESIGN

Reduction Exile Abstraction
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To learn but still to control so strong a tradition is a challenge. My effort was...
... to link that ritual of rocks... to our modern times and needs.-- Isamu Noguchi

I . Introduction
The history of garden design in Japan as elsewhere is closely linked with the history of architecture and consequently innovations in building design inevitably resulted in new approaches to garden design. In the Muromachi Period, for example, a new architectural form, the hōjō (abbot’s residence), contributed to the development of a new form of garden, namely the karesansui (dry landscape garden). Unlike the larger pond gardens, the karesansui could be handsomely compressed into the narrow plots adjacent to the hōjō in temple compounds where there was frequently no access to a spring to provide water for ponds. Similarly, consideration of the problems created by architectural developments for landscape design also serves as an entry point for the analysis of the modernization of the Japanese garden in the twentieth century; surely the steel-frame skyscraper and the corporate landscape park exerted a determining influence on whatever remnant of traditional Japanese garden design was to be perpetuated in such contemporary venues.

The landscape design realized by the Japanese American Isamu Noguchi (1904 - 1988) from the 1950s through the 1980s constitutes one of the most important oeuvres in a process we will call the modernization of the Japanese garden. Noguchi was unique for his combination of two modes of experience; he consistently involved himself with the artifacts of the Japanese cultural past and he was a leading proponent of modernist sculpture and design in the United States. In the early 1950s, Noguchi devoted himself to learning about Japanese premodern art and design and worked with Japanese architects, designers and artists to develop new ways of reformulating such prototypes so as to be relevant to modern times. He was particularly drawn to the monuments of the Japanese garden history such as the garden of Katsura Detached Palace in Kyoto where he was seen in 1950 “running around with his camera like a hunting dog.” This is an investigation of several works of landscape design which Noguchi realized in the 1950s and early 1960s and which were transposed from his harvest from the Japanese garden tradition.

II . Exile and Reduction.
Many of the problems which Noguchi would encounter in his postwar attempts to refashion elements of the Japanese garden for contemporary needs were already broached in the prewar period. One early instance of an uneasy resolution of conflicts arising from the practice of this premodern art form in the bosom of progressive architecture is Frank Lloyd Wright’s Imperial Hotel built in Tokyo from 1913 to 1923. The profusion of his exhuberant draftsmanship was carved in

2 For a discussion of the relationship between karesansui and the hōjō see Isao Yoshikawa, The World of Zen Gardens
porous white tufa stone (oya - ishi) and applied with brickwork to a reinforced steel concrete structure arrayed in an elaborate symmetrical plan. This H-shaped Beaux Arts plan enclosed several narrow courtyards around which the decorative stone artifice was displayed. One photograph (Figure 1) indicates that at some point a Japanese garden was installed in one of Wright's courtyards and although it is an uncustomary setting indeed, somehow the placement of flowering cherry trees, a stone lantern and a serpentine stream edged with a busy border of round pond stones manages to complement Wright’s decorative geometry. The abrupt displacement of features associated with the Japanese garden tradition to an alien architectural context illustrates the form of exile which the Japanese garden encountered repeatedly during its twentieth-century development. "Modernization" seems in part to be innovation motivated by the need to combat the strain of such deracination.

There are indeed precedents in Japanese garden history, such as the crowded virtuoso composition at the late sixteenth-century Sambo-in temple in Kyoto, which resonate with the Victorian excess of Wright’s hotel. But a very different set of values emerged in the new architecture of the 1920s pioneered by Europeans such as Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. The removal of ornament, the paring down of building volumes to flat planes, and the preference for asymmetry which they espoused created a new perspective from which to contemplate the Japanese garden. Sutemi Horiguchi, for example, toured Europe at the beginning of his career in 1923 and became infected by the energy of new design at the Weimar Bauhaus and was also inspired by ancient Greek architecture to study traditional Japanese culture. By the 1930s, Horiguchi had outgrown his earlier decorative impulse and admiration for German expressionist design and found his métier with a Bauhaus-inspired modernism. This tendency was accompanied by an increasing absorption with the subdued and tranquil sort of garden associated the teahouse tradition; Bauhaus modernism gave Horiguchi no taste for design such as the florid Sambo-in garden. He designed a series of buildings which were some of the earliest and most accomplished structures in Japan to manifest features of the International Style such as flat roofs, white walls and large planes of glass. Meanwhile he increasingly turned his attention toward the shoin and sukiya styles of traditional Japanese architecture and focused on the problem of how to adapt parts of the classical teahouse to modern architecture.

The Okada residence completed in 1934 in Tokyo is one of Horiguchi’s best-known solutions to this problem (Figure 2). The house is designed as a combination of two modes: one with a Bauhaus glass wall, straight lines, flat roof and the other in the sukiya style with tile roof, wooden posts, bamboo platform, tatami mats, and shoji. The small garden in the rear of the house plays an important unifying role in this collage. The path of irregular stepping stones (tobiishi) is designed in the tradition of such prototypes as Katsura Detached Palace, but the ruler-straight lines of the curbs bordering a rectangular pool of water just a few feet away are more like the pool of Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion. And in a bold gesture denying that such a combination need be discordant, Horiguchi placed two irregular boulders in the pool and used one to serve as a piling for a wooden post, a signature motif of the sukiya style.

Horiguchi’s ability to streamline the already restrained forms of the teahouse garden to an even flatter, even simpler and therefore more modern appearance won him acclaim from Christopher Tunnard, the leading practitioner and spokesman of modernist garden design in Europe and America.4 In the late 1930s, Tunnared published a theory of modernist garden and landscape design based on three principles: functionalism, asymmetry and sensitivity to modern art.5 His articulation of the second of these principles took the form of an effusive encomium of Japanese garden design. Tunnard’s Japanese garden was characterized by simplicity, the absence of color, subdued composition, a sense of unity with nature and a “feeling for a spiritual quality in inanimate objects.”6 No

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6 Ibid. p.87
awareness of gardens such as Sambo-in seems to have marred Tunnard's narrow construction of the Japanese garden tradition; ornament and intricacy were marginalized as tasteless European Japonisme. Among the illustrations of his ideal appears a residence by Horiguchi with an inner garden court appointed rather starkly with a perpendicular stone pavement, a flat and perfectly round stepping stone placed off-center, a bush, a tree and a rectangle of water. By comparison with the garden at the Imperial Hotel, Horiguchi's design looks virtually like an empty box. In Horiguchi's hands, the most minimal prototypes to be found in the Japanese garden tradition are subject to further reduction to plane flat surfaces and simple geometric shapes. Horiguchi's work establishes a precedent for modernizing the Japanese garden through a process of squaring, flattening and regularizing.

III . A Garden with a "Charming Second Use"

Noguchi had his first look at some of the famous gardens of Japan when he spent a few months in Kyoto during 1931, a few years before Horiguchi's Okada residence was completed in Tokyo. Nevertheless, his first major attempt to reconcile aspects of the Japanese garden tradition with modern design was to wait until his next visit to Japan many years later in the early 1950s. In 1951-52 he designed a garden for Antonin Raymond's new Reader's Digest Office which was prominently located across from the Hirakawa Gate of the Edo Palace in Tokyo. Raymond had served for a while as Wright's chief assistant on the Imperial, but ultimately concluded that the hotel design "had nothing in common with Japan, its climate, its traditions, its people and its culture". He subsequently remained in Japan to attempt to correct what he regarded as Wright's unfortunate unwillingness to absorb the merits of Japanese architecture and culture into modern architecture. During a wartime exile from Japan in the United States, Raymond had kept abreast of the advances in building technology from which the war had isolated Japanese architects and now he was anxious to introduce new materials and techniques to Japan in a showcase building that would also incorporate important elements from traditional Japanese design.

As an account in a contemporary American architectural journal attests, Noguchi's landscape design for the surrounding grounds was an important component of this demonstration: "Nowhere was the blending of cultures, new and old, Western and Eastern, more striking than in the collaboration between heating engineer and landscape gardener. The water needed for both the intake and the discharge of the modern heat pump was turned to a charming second use, flowing through the grounds in the freely shaped pools of sculptor Isamu Noguchi's version of a modernized Japanese garden." Thus it was the effuvium of an experimental heat pump that was to flow through the channel which Noguchi led around the backyard and under the rear wing of this office building (Figure 3). Photographs of Noguchi's landscape, which was destroyed in the late 1950s, indicate sod hills and a stream having the biomorphic forms of some of his own earlier work done in the milieu of Surrealism in New York. If these forms seem incapable of evoking the impression of a Japanese garden, the dumpling-like rocks which he found on the site comprise but a pitiful echo of the expressive presence of rocks in gardens such as that at the Katsura Detached Palace. Nevertheless, a respected art journalist wrote that, "The garden matches the feeling learned from Katsura Detached Palace, the Ryoan-ji stone garden, and other ancient Japanese temple and shrine gardens to contemporary technology, providing a model of new garden design..." If Noguchi's landscape evoked the traditional Japanese landscape garden, another element here was probably
intended to remind the viewer of the Imperial palace, the proximity of which was of great interest to Raymond. This was an impressive composition of stones at the entrance to the parking lot by the street where a section of the ground was closely packed with rough stones some of which rise up into a hump creating the effect of a sentinel (Figure 4). Soon after the garden was completed, Noguchi's own photograph of this stone arrangement was published in the art magazine Geijutsu shinchō identified in the caption as an ishizuka (cairn).

These heavy stones pieced together into a firm geometric solid would surely have reminded the visitor of the boulders in the ramparts of the Imperial Palace across the way and may also have called to mind the more ancient form of stone work suggested by the term ishizuka. Thus, while focusing on the elements which enter Noguchi's landscape design from the Japanese garden tradition, it is important to keep sight of the fact that such elements were not necessarily privileged over others from other areas of cultural history.

IV. The Corporate Landscape Park

While the Reader's Digest Project is an interesting experiment in the interface between technology and garden design, Noguchi would soon have the opportunity to design an entirely different landscape type enabled by technology. It was the automobile which made it possible for employers to locate large facilities for workplaces in areas of low population density without creating a transportation problem for their work force. In the 1950s, improvements in the highway system and suburban home building allowed American corporations to shift large office and factory buildings to rural areas in a process of de-urbanization which continues today.

A notable early postwar example was the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company which moved out of Hartford to the 280-acre site of a former farm in Bloomfield, Connecticut. Gordon Bunshaft, chief designer of the firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), designed a large horizontal steel and glass building for this arcadian setting. In order to keep employees of different sections of this large insurance business in close proximity to one another, the building was designed as a large block rather than distributed along a sprawling plan through the expansive grounds available. Consequently all but the periphery was closed off to the scenic view and Noguchi was commissioned to design gardens inside four courtyards as well as a terrace on the south side of the building.

Noguchi's deployment of telltale elements of the Japanese garden tradition such as whit gravel planes and irregular stepping stones (Figure 5) in this American setting constituted an "exile" of a wholly different order than the garden at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. For although Wright's design was an alien space for a Japanese garden, it could be argued that the garden represented an effort to contextualize the hotel to its location in Japan. On the other hand, the export of the Japanese garden overseas indicates a disregard for contextualization. The Japanese garden becomes an art form which is no longer limited to Japan and its adaptation to non-Japanese surroundings becomes a process of modernization. This view is represented in Christopher Tunnard’s modernist appreciation of the Japanese garden mentioned above. Though his admiration for a particular Japanese ideal of garden design in unconditional, he nevertheless cautions that the European or American designer must avoid superficial imitation and attend rather to the "underlying principles", for "obviously, our own must be founded on broader considerations, since it is governed by other factors."

Among the "other factors" which Noguchi contended with in Connecticut were the severe linear reticulation pattern of Bunshaft's glass and steel facade and the expansive surrounding lawns and handsome grovers of trees which were handled by Joanna Diman, the landscape designer at SOM. In a sense, Noguchi's job was to provide transition between the geometry of the building and the pastoral environs and he accomplished this, in part, by resorting to the combination of straight lines and organic forms found in the Japanese garden, particularly

12 Raymond, Ibid. p.211.
13 Noguchi, "Zōkei Nippon" Ibid.
14 Tunnard, Ibid. p.91.
in its early modern rendition by Horiguchi Sutemi. Although
the sweeping scale of the project in Connecticut gives it a
vastly different character from Horiguchi’s Okada Residence,
both Noguchi and Horiguchi were faced with the problem of
designing garden in conjunction with architecture of a
decidedly perpendicular character. Like Horiguchi in the
1930s, Noguchi selected and rationalized forms so as to
accommodate their architectural contest of severe unornamented
garden. Instead of garden rocks, he used an
occasional small cubic volume of unpolished stone.

While Noguchi’s terraces, pools, panels of turf and
plantings in Connecticut seem to their architectural context,
their efficacy is nevertheless a product of their contrast to the
precise geometry of the building. The rounded curbing,
blowing foliage, rippling water, and the roughness of the stone
blocks all play counterpoint to Bunshaft’s curtain walls as
well as provide a transition between the crisp contours of the
buildings and the natural surroundings. The contrast to the
architecture is considerably intensified in a group of three
abstract stone figures which Noguchi built of unfinished
granite blocks for the terrace on the south side of the building.
But when these totemic images, the largest of which was
sixteen feet tall, were ready for installation, the architect and
owner felt that they overwhelmed the scale of the building and
ultimately they were placed at quite some distance from the
facade on the other side of a lake (Figure 6).

Even at this great distance, however, the sculptural trio has still been
appreciated primarily in terms of its dramatic contrast to the
architecture: "They bring a massive, primordial element into
the highly technical atmosphere of this glassed-in building.
These sonorous, sculptural organisms, with their spreading
capitals, stand out like so many cyclops-mythical echoes from
the past that still permeate the present." The appreciation of
art in terms of its performance as a dramatic foil to
architecture -- the former associated with the irrational, the
aesthetic, and the expressive while the latter is controlled and
functional -- is a commonly repeated refrain in modernist
circles. Noguchi’s sculpture performed in this manner and
as we shall see, he increasingly resorted to a dramatization of
the contrast to the rationalism of architecture as a means by
which the garden contends with its modern architectural
backdrop.

V. The Skyscraper

While working on the Connecticut project, Noguchi was
also designing on two adjoining gardens in Paris which would
afford him a much more significant encounter with the Japanese
garden tradition. In 1956 Marcel Breuer asked Noguchi to
design a terrace at his new UNESCO headquarters in Paris.
This was a small triangular area above a parking garage which
was intended to serve as the Patio des Délegués. As he set to
work on the project, Noguchi became excited by the nature of
this symbolic site which incorporated contributions from
artists and designers from around the world and determined to
expand the scale of his contribution. He decided to develop
the lower ground adjacent to his terrace into a Jardin Japonais
which would be Japan’s contribution to this international
center and he managed to garner the support of the Foreign
Office in Tokyo to gather 88 tons of stones in Japan and ship
them to Paris. Thus, the circumstances of the commission and
the national symbolism interwoven by the design allowed a
perverse deracination of culture from its context. Otherwise, what

15 A more immediate precedent, however, is to be seen in the courtyard Tange Kenzō designed for the Shimizu City
Shuppansha, 1966. pp.147–8
16 For details of the placement to the sculpture see, Andrea O. Dean, "Bunshaft and Noguchi: An Uneasy But Highly
18 One spokesman for this view is Tarō Okamoto: "as opposed to the rationality and functionality necessarily inherent
in architecture, the chaos and irrationality desired by human beings ought to be vigorously provided (by art)... The
space of an organic emotional art brings to life the space of rationalism and functionalism... the polarized rivalry
between them creates a tension which results in a real living space. 'Junsui geijutsu to kenchiku no ketsugo"
[The Combination of Pure Art and Architecture] Shinkenchiku June, 1958. and reprinted in Tange Kenzō and
sense would it make to create a Japanese garden at the foot of a reinforced steel office tower in Paris?

While the Imperial Hotel, the Okada Residence and the Reader’s Digest had each brought elements of the Japanese garden into strident juxtaposition with uncustomary materials, the horizontal massing of both buildings enabled a continuation of a semblance of the scale customary in the premodern garden. But the effectiveness of such composition was overthrown when the task was designing a garden for a high rise. Yet when Noguci embarked on this project, he assumed the posture of a novice learning about the traditional Japanese garden rather than the role of artist searching for elements useful to his own work.19 To be sure, the lower garden at UNESCO is hardly an “unadulterated” reconstruction of a prototype from Japan. For instance, the cobblestone paving, the long ramp which Noguchi likened to the hanamichi of a kabuki theater and the plan of overlapping lobed sections cannot be attributed to the Japanese garden tradition. These innovations may reflect the influence of Mirei Shigemori, a prominent garden scholar and designer who helped Noguchi in his search for rocks to take to Paris. Shigemori, himself, had designed a program of gardens for the hōjō at Tofuku-ji temple in Kyoto in 1938 which introduced novel features such as a well-known checker pattern of squares of moss and stone. Noguchi photographed this garden in 1957 and this remarkable garden would surely have emphasized the potential of the garden ground to be treated as a patterned field.

But the innovations Noguchi realized in the lower garden at UNESCO through the influence of Shigemori or otherwise are ultimately less conspicuous than his respectful installation of conventions such as the stone basin (chozubachi) stone foot bridge, irregular footstones, dwarf bamboo, cherry trees, and decorative maples (Figure 7). Indeed, the lower garden at UNESCO was the most conservative rendition of a traditional Japanese garden that Noguchi would ever realize. He failed to adapt his prototype to the radically different context to which he had grafted it and consequently the looming modern facade seems to dwarf the garden, underscoring the impression that it is exiled from its homeland. Noguchi’s own retrospective reflections on the lower garden, suggest that he was keenly aware of these problems: "More truthfully, I should say that I never wanted to make a purely Japanese garden. It would not have been in scale—not that it is perfect in this respect—at least I did my best with the materials at hand. The planting I see is too much, or too divergent—but what planting is equal to large modern buildings? What stones excepting in strictest isolation?"20

Noguchi allowed himself to mediate allusions to the Japanese garden in the upper Patio des Délegués much more vigorously than the lower garden and consequently it performs more successfully in relation to Breuer’s building. He plays with some of Breuer’s materials and contours in an asymmetrical arrangement of stone paving, benches, tables, lighting and steps. The most prominent feature here is a rough-hewn stele with the character for peace engraved in reverse and a stream of water coursing down the front (Figure 8). The display to uncarved, unpolished skin of this stone is certainly reminiscent of the use of rocks in the Japanese garden tradition, but the departure from such precedents is also striking. For the rock is hoisted into a vertical position like a member of stonehenge and its metaphorical allusions are literalized by means of the inscription. This emphatic monumentality suggests a crossbreeding of value between the Japanese garden rock and the culture of abstract sculpture. We shall return to this topic shortly, for now it should be mentioned that Kenzo Tange was taking a similar approach to rock composition at the foot of a modern high rise at the same time as Noguchi’s work for UNESCO. In the plaza at the base of his Kagawa Prefectural Government Office in Shikoku, Tange installed a group of large boulders in a dynamic vertical composition impressive even in juxtaposition with the facade of the high rise (Figure 9).

The next garden with close links to Japan which Noguchi would design was for one of the tallest of a thicket of

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19 For a record of this attitude, see the text of a panel discussion between Isamu Noguchi, Tange Kenzō, and Hisatsune Shūji, "Niwa no zokei"[The Garden Form] Geijutsu Shinchō June, 1956.
20 A Sculptor’s World p.167.
skyscrapers in the Wall Street area of Manhattan. The early 1960s was the beginning of the era of the "urban plaza" when municipal zoning authorities encouraged developers to build high towers in the middle of broad spaces for public use. Thus, Gordon Bunshaft's Chase Manhattan Bank was built on only thirty percent of a two and a half acre plaza. Chase gained additional space by building a few stories under the plaza and for daylight, a large circular well with glass walls was recessed into the plaza. Thus, at the foot of a massive aluminum and glass tower and surrounded by more tall buildings, lay a flat surface the size of large parking lot with a large round cavity bored out of the center. The problem was how to make this oppressive urban space more amenable to the pedestrian. Once again, Noguchi's inclination was to return to Japanese garden history for inspiration and we see him visiting the famous stone garden at Ryōan-ji with Nina and Gordon Bunshaft in 1960 (Figure 10). But wisened now by his experience with Breuer's UNESCO, Noguchi deliberately differentiated his modern work from the classical prototypes which he so greatly admired. The stress is on the possessive when Noguchi referred to his Chase design as "my Ryōan-ji."21 This time he was much more selective about the rocks which he found in Japan than those he exported to Paris; he obtained a group of rocks from the Uji River south of Kyoto which had been worn into astonishing paisley forms by the movement of the water (Figure 11). This in itself was an intelligent move for the very eccentricity of these rock forms, which is more typical of Chinese than Japanese connoisseurship of rocks, enabled them to perform with the boldness they would require in the harsh overwhelming space awaiting them in New York. In a further departure from the Japanese garden tradition where rocks often seem embedded and weighted securely into the earth, Noguchi wished to install these eccentric rocks in such a way that they seemed to "levitate out of the ground."22 He had explored the theme of floating solids, which stands in a long modern tradition of cantilevered buildings and abstract painting, in several media and associated it with gravitilessness encountered in space travel.23 Now he turned to this theme of modernity again to bring to his Ryōan-ji something of the character of a moonscape as a means of acclimating it to the harsh urban specter of Manhattan. Encouraged no doubt by the example of Mirei Shigemori's garden mentioned above, Noguchi attempted to achieve this illusion of floating by the treatment of the horizontal plane as a sensuous relief, a carefully crafted carpet of white cobblestones arranged in a gentle billowing pattern of concentric circles intersected by wavy lines. In the summer when the water level is just right it glazes this horizontal relief except for the slightly protruding convexities of the summits of these concentric circles. It is from these beachheads that the dark water – sculpted rocks might seem to "levitate". Thus, while Noguchi aims here for a sensation of "floating", a theme which he associated with discoveries novel to contemporary times such as gravitiless states in outer space.

Another important feature of this garden which sharply differentiates it from precedents in the Japanese garden tradition is the overhead view. The design appears to take into account the fact that many of its viewers would be standing at the edge of the plaza above the circular well if not looking down from the windows of the looming skyscraper. Rarely could a premodern Japanese garden be viewed in the panoptic manner which a sunken garden affords. Indeed it has been suggested that Japanese gardens were distinguished by their lack of an unobstructed view of the entire layout from any given point.24 Given this definitive feature of the medium of the sunken garden, one would have to consider the capability of Noguchi's design to transmit an agreeable effect to the pedestrians on the plaza above. Contrary to the impression given by fish-eye lens photographs of the plaza, the garden remains lost in what Eero Saarinen dubbed "sunken art hole,"25 Ultimately,

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21 Ibid. p.171.
22 Ibid.p.171.
while the garden succeeds in generating a fascinating vista for
those who view it from within the glass walls of the banking
concourse below the plaza, it does not succeed in bringing
elements of the Japanese garden into meaningful interaction
with the form of the skyscraper itself. To do so would require
not rocks which seem merely to "levitate" but elements which
mediate a drastically oversized space.

Others have continued the attempt to adapt elements of the
Japanese garden for use with the tall building in recent years.
It has become somewhat fashionable to attach a garden to the
base of luxury hotels in Japan, and architects have become
more adroit in doing so than in the days of Wright’s Imperial.
Perhaps the most successful device has been the waterfall with
spillage of sufficient volume and roar that it seems to match
the scale of the soaring hotel tower above. This can be seen,
for example, in the construction of a tower above a preexisting
strolling garden for the New Otani Hotel by the Taisei
Corporation in Tokyo and, more recently, the design by
Masamichi Suzuki’s office of a tea garden and karesansui as
well as a waterfall of gargantuan proportions for the Sheraton
Hotel on Tokyo Bay in Chiba Prefecture (Figure 12). On the
other hand, an architect might simply ignore the problem of
integrated scale and introduce an intimate garden space at the
foot of a tall building with the hope that people would be
dissuaded from looking upwards. This is the impression
created by Kisho Kurokawa’s garden for an office tower in
Fukuoka; one enters through a small chrome and glass gate to
be guided by a sequence of tobiishi alongside a single tree at
the edge of a plane of white gravel with a single chrome cone
standing in the center like a pile of sand in an Edo-period
stone garden (Figure 13). The gate and pathway are handled
much like the roji garden leading to a teahouse albeit realized
with new materials of pristine finish which makes Horiguchi’s
buildings in the 1930s seem like abobe huts. This is all a very
persuasive program, but if one dares to look up, one will find
a modern glass and metal tower beveling out above one’s herd
with a smothering effect on the intimate economies of space at
one’s feet. Perhaps such spatial disjunctions do not disturb
most users today; perhaps most people happily screen out the
monstrous heights which loom above them as they go about
their lives underfoot.

VI. Abstraction of the Garden.

While working on the Chase project during the early
1960s, Noguchi was also designing another sunken garden for
a building by Gordon Bunshaft. This was the Beinecke Rare
Book Library at Yale University which faces a plaza like
Chase but is a much smaller building and stands on a much
more moderately scaled plaza. Nevertheless, this sunken
court is even more severed from the plaza and building above
than that at Chase; the rectangular chamber at Yale is open to
the sky but spatially cordoned off from the plaza and the
library facade by a severe, bulky parapet which is difficult for
the pedestrians to look over (Figure 14). Sheltered from the
greater sweep of space, Noguchi’s design is harbored in a
clean glass quadrilateral where it is viewed primarily by the
library staff from their offices around three sides and the
students and scholars in the reading room on the fourth side.
Thus, while there is no spatial interaction between the garden
design and the elevation of the library, a very congenial
setting has been hollowed out within the architectural program
for a garden. However, one is hard put to use the designation
"garden" to describe Noguchi’s solution for this space; it
consists merely of a linear paving pattern, a pyramid, a disk,
and a cube -- all in polished white marble (Figure 15). If
features from Japanese garden history were transposed at
Chase to circumstances remote from their traditional context,
the Yale project seems to have left all such references behind.
Indeed, if recognizable features are the taxonomical
determinant, the move from Chase to Yale would seem to
take a shift from the "modern Japanese garden" to a new
genre, perhaps "sculpture court".

But the lack of indicators such as a cluster of natural rocks
set into the earth, an ornamental pine, or a pathway of tobiishi
does not preclude compelling links to the Japanese garden
tradition. First of all, noting that the artist imagined the work

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26 This was dictated by structural concerns. Retrospectively, the architect commented, "It should have been 9 inches thick...
It looked good to have it [as] thick [as it is], but we weren’t thinking about people looking down into the court.” Carol
as "a garden in which everything would be of white marble" and that his first concept "started from the sand mounds often found in Japanese temples"\(^27\), we can hardly resist comparing his patterned plane and pyramidal mound to the raked gravel formations in a garden such as that of Ginkaku-ji in Kyoto. Moreover, Noguchi's work at Beinecke resembles karesansui gardens such as Ryoan-ji for its rectangular plot composed entirely of stone (without water or foliage) and for the fact that it is not intended to be entered but rather viewed from outside the periphery. Thus although the Beinecke court looks very different from a Japanese garden at first glance, it might nonetheless be located in an ambiguous position on the edge of the genre "the modern Japanese garden". This status, however, is easily formalized by a reception of remarks likening the design to the "contemplative spaces" of traditional Japanese gardens and its designer to "a Zen priest".\(^28\)

Having reached this point, it is of great interest to consider the distance which the Japanese garden has migrated in Noguchi's hands, for the parameters definitive of the "Japanese garden" have significantly exceeded previous limits. The most obvious innovation is the severe geometry which excludes not only foliage and rocks but largely excludes the curvilinear biomorphism so common in Noguchi's oeuvre. Ryōan-ji and the Beinecke garden might both be rectangles of stone but there is a world of difference between the gravel and mossy rocks of the former and the unrelenting polished white surfaces of the latter. This could be understood as a more advanced stage in a progressive development of the garden design which we saw in Sutemi Horiguchi's work of the 1930s, abetted perhaps by the milieu of contemporary American sculpture which was entering the beginning stages of Minimalism in the early 1960s. On the other hand, the artist tells us that, after thinking about Japanese gardens and while developing his Beinecke design, his mind then drifted to the astronomical gardens of India and the more formal paving patterns of Italy.\(^29\) Thus, the metamorphosis of the Japanese garden takes place through the mediation of a contemporary cultural environment and mutates through cross-breeding with other cultures.

Architecture also placed constraints upon the garden which Noguchi would devise for this space. Two preliminary studies, which probably represent Noguchi’s initial thoughts about karesansui, propose a much more subtle intrusion into the space of the court than that realized. These models indicate that the artist would have restricted his modification of the quadrilateral space to smooth sensuous convexities seeming to push up softly from the ground surface.\(^30\) It may have been a sense that such subtleties would yield but a feeble impact in the face of the sharp lines and precise reflections of the glass and stone court which led the architect to reject another preliminary study: "I thought it was very beautiful, except for the round, doughnut element, which was a little soft. Noguchi made several studies for it, and I really didn’t like any of them. Noguchi was annoyed at first but tried some more, and he eventually came up with what we have now, which is marvelous."\(^31\) In the design which Bushaft approved, the forms depart from the horizontal ground and assume a degree of volumetric autonomy, particularly the cube balanced on a corner and the ring mounted vertically. Although they are placed on a surface with which they are coordinated in terms of material and although they appear to be located purposefully at particular spots on the linear pattern in this surface, nonetheless the cube and ring are objects placed on a surface. This is a deviation from garden composition where objects, even rocks, appear planted in the surface. Even the rocks in the Chase garden, for all the interest in a sense of levitation, are nevertheless very firmly anchored into their cobblestone bed. At Yale, on the other hand, the installation

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29 A Sculptor's World p.170.
30 These are illustrated in Nancy Grove and Diane Botnick, The Sculpture of Isamu Noguchi, 1924–1979 Garland, 1980.cat.no.503.A.
in notable for the appearance of the volatility; the cube seems ready to topple and the disk ready to roll across the floor like a tire. This kinetic potential gives the garden an dynamic character, a sense of tension contrasting to the greater stability of the architectural surround.

The beinecke presses yet another modernist aesthetic value into the terrain of the Japanese garden, that of abstract personal expression. Christopher Tunnard had esteemed the Japanese garden for its facilitation of empathetic responses to motifs from nature such as a branch blowing in the wind and imputed that this sensibility posed an affinity to modernist abstraction: "The phenomenon of Japanese art most significant to modern designers should be the feeling for a spiritual quality in inanimate objects, that feeling which makes the Oriental smile at European painters' efforts to obtain physical likeness and exact perspective."32 Yet the empathy for nature which Tunnard ascribed to the Japanese garden was a very different sort of abstraction than that pervasive among modernists of his and Noguchi's generation. Despite the attribution of the great gardens of Japanese history to venerated individuals such as Musō Soseki, it is more likely that they came into existence through collaborative effort and adherence to conventions rather than created sui generis and that the aesthetic content attributed to garden motifs was collective rather than individually formulated and opaque.33

On the other hand, Noguchi's garden at Yale, though determined by cultural and architectural conditions such as those discussed here, was designed and received in a milieu which valorized self expression. This assumption can be felt in Noguchi's unilateral dictation of a program of connotations for the abstract forms of his garden -- the pyramid: geometry of the earth or of the past; the disk: sun, a ring of energy; the cube: chance34 -- and the respectful iteration of these symbols by commentators who regard the artist's statement of intentions as an irreducible equivalent to the content of the work of art. But perhaps even more than this stance, it is a process of production which indicates the modernist assumptions of self expression at work here. Noguchi's contract with the marble company stipulated that they would "fabricate the stone to within one-eighth of an inch" of the forms specified in his maquette and that he would then complete each element "by his own labor."35 In the artist's monograph which was published with his collaboration, a photograph appears in which the sculptor is shown impressively wielding a chisel to remove a small bite from the large torus for Yale.36 Apparently the several knicks and grooves and dimples in the ring and the cube were manually excised by the artist after the forms themselves were made to specification by stone workers with professional equipment. Somewhat decorative, somewhat disturbing, these last minute subtractions are peculiar indeed. Holding no particular meaning to the iconography as prescribed by Noguchi himself37, it is as though the artist was simply compelled to "leave his mark" in some final manner on this work.

In the end, one of the keenest observations about the achievement of the modernization of the Japanese garden, a process negotiated between the exigencies of large modern institutional architecture and the aspirations of self-expression is their disturbing sense of disequilibrium. Noguchi himself discovered this on a quiet Sunday afternoon when he visited the vast empty windswept plaza of Chase Manhattan Bank and looked down on his crater-like garden in the yawning cavity below: "Nature and non-Nature. There will come other gardens to correspond to our changing concepts of reality; disturbing and beautiful gardens to awaken us to a new awareness of our solitude. Can it be that nature is no longer

32 Tunnard, Ibid. p. 87.
34 This is summarized from a more elaborate poetic statement "based on what I originally wrote for the architects" in Isamu Noguchi, "New Stone Gardens" Art in America. June, 1964. p. 84.
35 Quoted by Ashton, Ibid. p. 184.
36 Hunter, Ibid. p. 150.
37 Noguchi’s five paragraphs of text which elaborate the sun, earth, chance symbolism give no indication that the iconography he intended would not be just as well served by the forms without removing these chunks from the torus and cube. Isamu Noguchi, "New Stone Gardens" Ibid.
These doubts expressed so cogently and with such candor by Noguchi in 1968 have received full play in more recent garden design. The artist Martha Schwartz, for example, installed a garden on a rooftop in Boston which spliced together images of a formal French garden and a Japanese garden in the plastic garden vocabulary of cheap American hardware stores. And as an element of her Shonandai Community Center in Fujisawa City, the architect Itsuko Hasegawa devised a shiny metal bridge and set of trees to install over a stream that winds its way beneath a huge metal globe through a fissure in a pavement of tiles broken away in the manner of digital message units (Figure 16). Both Schwartz and Hasegawa invoke the Japanese garden tradition through parodic recall; fulfilling Noguchi’s prediction, the media memory of the garden seems to have supplanted the role of nature in the garden. Innocent of such postmodernist flippancy, Noguchi’s project could be described as a desire to absorb aspects of Japanese garden history so deeply into his own creative work that they would be scarcely recognizable to the viewer. His goal was not the appropriation of tradition but its integration into a statement of originality produced on a model of self-expression and innovation driven by new architectural circumstances. These themes can be traced through a series of many major subsequent garden works by Noguchi not discussed here, but the parameters of the modernization of the Japanese garden was already achieved in his work at the Beinecke library.

38 A Sculptor’s World p.171.
Figure 1. Japanese garden in the courtyard of Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel. Tokyo. 1923. (David B. Stewart, The Making of a Modern Japanese Architecture Kodansha, 1987. p. 88.)

Figure 2. Sutemi Horiguchi. Okada Residence. Tokyo. 1934. (Stewart, Ibid. p. 128).


Figure 4. Noguchi. Cairn at the Reader's Digest Building. Tokyo. 1952. (Kurita, Ibid. p. 124.)


Figure 7. Noguchi. Lower garden at the UNESCO headquarters. Paris. 1956-58. (Minami Gallery. Ibid. p. 29.)


Figure 10. Noguchi and Gordon and —Bunshaft at Ryōan-ji. 1960. (Krinsky. Ibid, p.164.)


Figure 12. Masamichi Suzuki. Sheraton Hotel on Tokyo Bay in Chiba Prefecture. 1988. (Nitschke, Ibid, p.311.)
Figure 13. Kisho Kurokawa. Yasuda Fire Insurance Co. Fukuoka. (Cottom-Winslow, Ibid. p.66.)

Figure 14. Gordon Bunshaft. Beinecke Rare Book Library, Yale University. 1960-64. (Krinsky, Ibid. p.100.)

Figure 15. Noguchi. Garden at the Beinecke Rare Book Library. 1960-61. (Minami Gallery, Ibid. p140.)

Figure 16. Itsuko Hasegawa. Shonandai Community Center, Fujisawa City. (Nitschke, Ibid. p.274.)