



ISAMU NOGUCHI

**CALIFORNIA
SCENARIO**

California Scenario

California Scenario was created by the Japanese-American sculptor, set designer, and furniture designer, Isamu Noguchi, and is a fascinating example of where old Japanese culture meets California modern.

A 1.6-acre public sculpture garden created in 1982 in Costa Mesa, California Scenario is a metaphorical garden, an abstract evocation of California, composed of several landscapes within a landscape. This abstract minimalist garden reveals the influences of the Zen karesansui dry garden, of the Muromachi era. In the karesansui garden, Ryoan-ji, for example, rocks take on the stature of mountains, moss the ancient cedar forest. In the book *The Japanese Garden*, the abstract and philosophical, symbolic nature of the Japanese dry garden is well articulated:



California Scenario, 1982

gardens, symbolism is at play in the small elements that represent much larger ones, a stone represents a mountain, a curve of several Redwood trees represents an entire forest, a meandering stream and source of water represents water issues across the state of California. In Noguchi's garden, six elements comprise the symbolic characteristics of the California landscape, in a kind of theatrical minimalist installation: "Forest Walk" takes visitors past a grove of California redwoods beside a horseshoe-shaped path. "Land Use" is an eight-foot high knoll, topped with a single coffin-like form of sierra white granite. "Desert Land" a circular mound covered in sand-stone pebbles and featuring native cactus, agave and other desert plants on a domed gravel-covered mound. "Water Source" a 30 ft high sandstone triangle, with water flowing down a channel, that functions as the beginning of the stream. "Water Use" a polished white granite pyramid symbolizing the end of the meandering California Scenario stream, into which the stream dramatically disappears. The "Energy Fountain" is 25 ft in diameter, a cone and made of granite bricks and a stainless steel cylinder. Additionally, "Spirit of the Lima Bean," a tribute to the commissioner, is composed of 15 rust-colored granite rocks, cut precisely to fit together in a 12 ft high mound that gives historical continuity to earlier use of the site, once a Lima Bean Farm. Noguchi aims to get to the essence of California by representing these geological elements.

“The idea of a garden without plants may seem obscure and even contradictory, but in Japan the karesansui garden (‘dry landscape,’ translating as *kare* (dry), *san* (mountain), *sui* (water) is perhaps the most celebrated garden form, despite the fact that it consists mostly – and sometimes wholly – of gravel and stone. This unlikely form of garden is conceptually challenging, and yet its inanimate nature broadens the intellectual possibility of the garden, giving rise to multiple readings of content, space and meaning while engaging propositions about space, memory and time” (Walker, 182).

Here in Noguchi's garden, large stones are placed within a vast minimalist landscape of sand-colored stone pavers, reminiscent of the large expanses of sculpted sand in the Japanese dry Zen gardens, where abstract elements are reduced to their essential characteristics.

Noguchi explains the name, California Scenario, during the construction of the project saying, "It's a story," and, "... this is an abstract representation of the geology and geography of the State of California" (Listening to the Stone, the Art and Life of Isamu Noguchi, Herrera, 462). As in old Japanese



California Scenario, 1982



Ryoan-ji (Temple of the Dragon at Peace), 1450

California Scenario



Energy Fountain



Land Use



Water Source



Forest Walk



Water Use



Desert Land



California Scenario

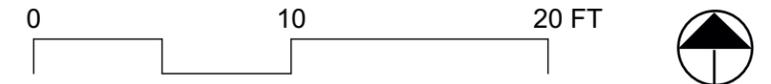
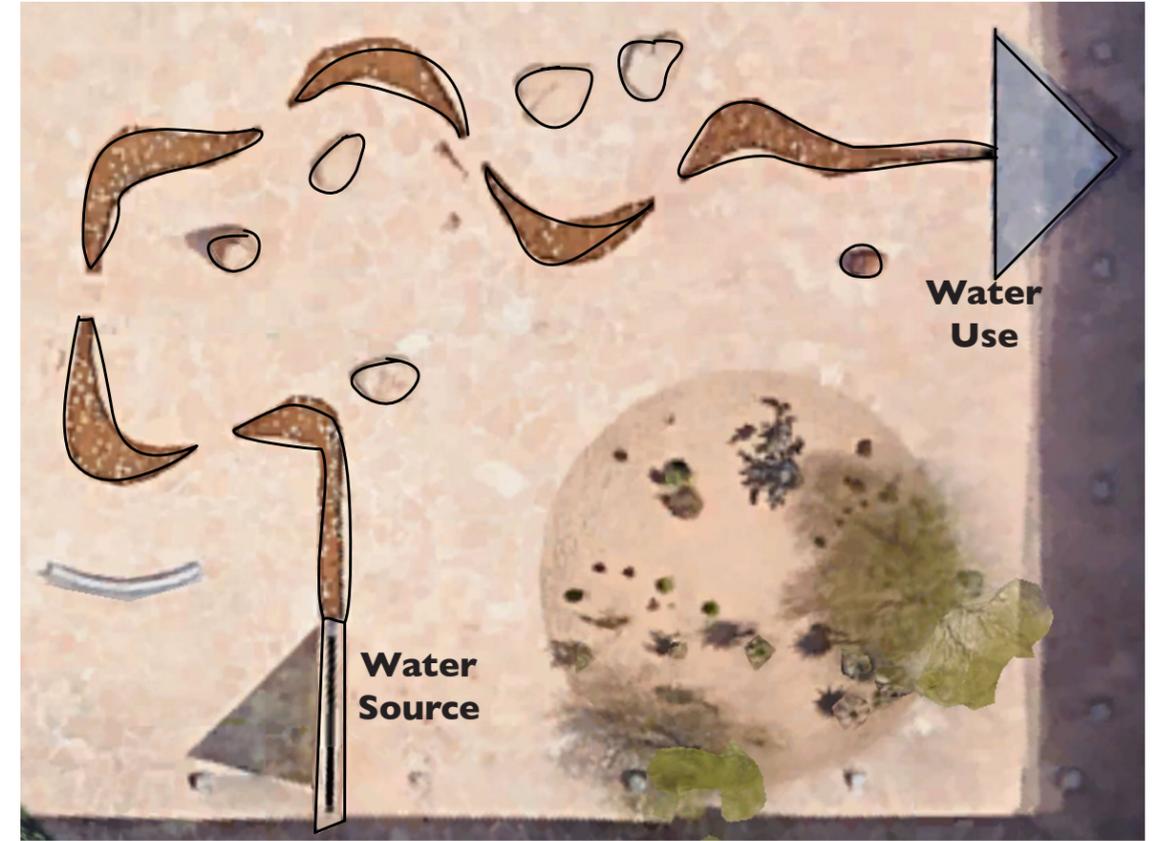
Another old Japanese design precedent evidenced here is the yarimizu, or winding stream. It is seen as a prominent central feature that meanders through the space, appearing and disappearing. Here, the stream found in nature is displayed as a kind of poetic concept. Nature is idealized and revered and it inspires poetic thinking in the garden. As Noguchi said, "To order space is to give it meaning" (Walker, 192). Here, the stream is like a wide river cut through a canyon, the pyramid, "Water Use," like a distant mountain.



Thomas Church & Lawrence Halprin, Donnell Garden, 1948

karesansui Zen gardens, and Noguchi was clearly inspired when he visited the dry gardens of Japan in 1931 and again in 1950, "...one has the sense of being transported into a vast void, into another dimension of reality – time ceases, and one is lost in reverie, gazing at the rocks...they grow out of the earth... and for this reason they seem to float like the peaks of mountains" (188). California Scenario shows influence of California post-war garden design, such as Church and Halprin's iconic Donnell Garden, in the focus on paired-down abstract geometry, minimalism and materiality of steel, stone, and reflectivity. "Water Source" stands like a minimalist modern sculpture, 30' sandstone with an channel cut for water to flow down through.

In addition, California Scenario shows influences of post-war California modern garden design, and the garden is composed of several modern sculptures, such as "Water Source." Like Noguchi's contemporaries, he is inspired by Bauhaus, and to bring it full circle, the Bauhaus movement and post-war modern artists were inspired by old Japanese gardens. In 1954, Walter Gropius visited Japanese dry garden of Ryoan-Ji and wrote in a postcard to Le Corbusier that he saw a connection in what they were aiming to achieve: "Dear Corbu, all of what we have been fighting for has its parallel in old Japanese culture. Zen-monks in the 13th century – stones and raked white pebbles – could be by Arp or Brancusi – an elating spot of peace. You would be as excited as I am in this 200 year old space of cultural wisdom!... Yours, Gropius" (182-183). The modern sculptor, Richard Serra, wrote about his impressions visiting



Jean Arp, 1936



Richard Serra, 1939



Brancusi, 1918



California Scenario, "Water Source"



California Scenario, "Water Source"

California Scenario

The Buddhist influence is evident in the quiet, meditative and reflective atmosphere, inspiring the act of waiting patiently, zazen (seated meditation), waiting to see clearly. As Noguchi described during the installation, the garden is a space for reflection and transformation: “This process of discovery, which you might say is the awakening, the awareness, the satori, the opening up, always opens up to something else, all you know is that you don’t know,



experience is merely the acquisition of some courage, there is no such thing as the wise man, he still has to become.” The Zen Buddhist opposites and counter forces are apparent: form and no form, material and immaterial in the reflection of water and shadow, earthly and heavenly. Japanese gardens are made of balanced counterparts, where tending to the garden is in itself Buddhist practice and involves the search for inner growth.

Noguchi is also veering towards environmentalism in the way his “Land Use” refers to the misuse of land in industrial development. He articulates: “I wanted to show the process by which water comes from a source and ends up as energy and to address the problems of industrial incursion... California as the original paradise has been transformed... this garden is a sort of soliloquy on why the situation is the way it is” (Herrera, 461). The garden reveals a general contemplative melancholia which is typical of his work. Whether it’s the coffin-like structure of “Land Use,” the industrial shape and materiality of “Energy Fountain” or the call to ponder about “Water Source” and “Water Use” in a state not producing enough water for its residence, there is a solemnity in the peaceful, contemplative atmosphere. Where Segerstrom, one of the commissioners of the garden, initially wanted “a very soft green landscape area,” Noguchi said he wanted to, “get away from all the green grass everywhere.” During the installation of the project, Noguchi explains: “These things came out of a kind of expression of wanting to create an environment which was the environment of our imagination, we live in a world, for a world that we imagine... It may not coincide to reality, but is a kind of precursor of reality, if it isn’t reality today, maybe it’s a reality tomorrow... what we would like to have, paradise, you might say... I’m not responsible for how it’s used, I hope it will have the influence on people who use it... I hope it will be a place people come to, to escape from

the world that surrounds them, that is the purpose of a garden, is it not?” Noguchi is giving the viewers reprieve from the two 15-story glass-facade corporate office buildings, the nearby 405 freeway, the white plastered walls of the 40’ high parking garage of the South Coast Plaza and providing a beautiful and serene space for contemplative reflection.

