

# California's Orange County: Noguchi's Sculpture Garden California Scenario in Costa Mesa



[Noguchi's California Scenario Sculptures](#) - Images by [Lee Foster](#)

by Lee Foster

A major artistic attempt to interpret California exists in a public setting at Costa Mesa in Southern California.

The art is by Isamu Noguchi, a California native whom many critics consider to be one of America 's leading sculptors. His creation is a 1.6-acre collection of sculptures and plantings called CALIFORNIA SCENARIO. This Costa Mesa sculpture and horticulture landscape presents an abstract, condensed vision of the Golden State .

The setting is Henry J. Segerstrom's South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa , the business hub of Orange County . CALIFORNIA SCENARIO rests between two major bank skyscrapers and a parking structure.

"The works of Isamu Noguchi are inspiring," said Henry Segerstrom of C. J.

Segerstrom & Co when the sculptures were installed. "CALIFORNIA SCENARIO will have a profound impact on the lives of all of us living within Orange County and throughout the state. It is a legacy from Isamu Noguchi to his birthplace."

Noguchi, whose work over a 50-year span won international acclaim, saw his creation as a "dramatic abstract of the California environment."

The setting's sculptural and horticultural elements address an ambitious theme: a representation of the reality of California. The artist's manner of presentation is highly crafted, evoking the restrained and representational qualities so appreciated in some Japanese art. Noguchi attempts to recreate and reconstitute, in miniature, the experience of the state.

As you walk around this urban space, which is open free to the public from 8 a.m. to midnight, six distinct and named aspects of California greet you. The names are the sculptor's words and do not appear on the images themselves.

WATER SOURCE is a stark, 30-foot, triangular form of sandstone, suggesting the mountainous water fountain that nourishes all life in the Golden State. (I suggest this link because Noguchi's WATER SOURCE is a stimulus to celebrate the joy of water in our own households.) The sandstone sculpture includes its own miniature, cascading waterfalls, providing sound, movement, and life-giving potential to the landscape. After the water leaves the mountains, it weaves through the landscape before disappearing into a carefully-mitered triangular form of polished Sierra white granite, called WATER USE. Some subtleties of the setting become apparent if you pause and meditate here. For example, the thin rock edging of the waterway at the mountains becomes thicker as the water meanders to the ocean, suggesting how water helps create a topsoil that becomes thicker and richer as the stream proceeds.

Along the way, as you walk along the stream, you see aspects of the natural and human landscape in California. A symmetrical, circular mound, titled The DESERT LAND, suggests the stark beauty of California 's deserts. The plant materials here are natives, such as beaver tail and barrel cactus, ocotillo, and agave.

Balancing the desert is a small meadow of wildflowers and grasses, bordered by redwood trees, rising from a mound of earth with its own Sierra white granite

pathway and park bench. The delicate needles of the redwoods play against the distinct black windows of the background commercial building. This area of the garden is called THE FOREST WALK.

The use of nature and harnessing of natural forces is a major reality in California , as suggested in an element called LAND USE. This section consists of an eight-foot-high knoll, topped with a simple form of Sierra white granite, with the ground draped by honeysuckles.

ENERGY FOUNTAIN, a further distinctive creation, embodies the dynamism of California, almost a country unto itself if one considers its productivity and role in the world beyond. The fountain consists of a stainless steel cone on a base of broken-face Rockville granite.

Altogether, the effect of the sculpture garden exceeds a tenet of geometry. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The vision is both restful and dynamic, thoughtful and surreal, as you pause and walk through it. Given such an undertaking, a representation of California , one wonders what the possibilities could be, as each citizen and each artist searches within himself or herself for an adequate expression. Noguchi, in his subtle way, enlarges our own vision and provokes us to ask how our vision compares with his.

Aside from the discussed elements, one further presence in the garden is a sculpture of fifteen, rounded, bronze-colored granite rocks, cut by Noguchi and fitted precisely together. Called THE SPIRIT OF THE LIMA BEAN, they salute the half century of agricultural use of this land, owned by the Segerstrom family.

Though the seasons have little impact on southern California, the effect of the setting changes with light conditions and with the maturity of the plantings. The impressions that strike a visitor are closely earth-related, as you stroll a path, climb the small hill, listen to the gurgling water, or rest on the granite benches, contemplating the striking geometric and organic forms.

Isamu Noguchi was born in Los Angeles in 1904 and died in 1988. He was known for his theatre and ballet sets, monumental fountains, and giant landscapes.

To see CALIFORNIA SCENARIO, take Interstate 405 (the San Diego Freeway) to Costa Mesa and exit east at Bristol Street, then turn right on Anton, and right again on Park Centre Drive, which borders the sculpture garden.