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URBAN JOURNAL

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Completely Grounded

A landscape architect helps unearth the details of a new California park.

By Jade Chang

Posted October 9, 2007

Over the next three years the Orange County Great Park will grow into a 1,300-acre stretch of new and reclaimed wilderness, topped with layers of cultivated gardens and museums ([Up, Up, and Away](#), September, 2007). Los Angeles-based landscape architect Mia Lehrer, a member of the design team and head of [Mia Lehrer and Associates](#), was going to give *Metropolis* a preview of the park from atop its first attraction: a giant orange hot air balloon. But the scheduled day was too windy, and the balloon was grounded. Instead, this Q&A was conducted in an old airplane hangar leftover from the site's earlier life as the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station.

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How did you get involved in [this project](#)?

It was a competition. Ken Smith put together a team—he called from New York. I had been considering putting together my own team, but I had just finished the master plan for the LA River.

How is the park laid out?

There's this ecological framework for the park. There's a wilderness feature, then Agua Chinon, a stream that allows water from the upper wilderness areas to flow through to the lower. We're celebrating this water feature too. It was covered over in the past to get the runway going. The canyon is this sinuous element that has a lot of topography to it, there's a huge temperature change when you're in it. But right now this is all flat, nothing exists.

So how do you do that? How do you create a landscape where nothing exists?

That was the big question. Ken did some exploring around Southern California. There are a lot of canyons, the one at Balboa Park [in the San Fernando Valley] was especially influential. The curvilinear spaces in the Orange County Great Park, the decision to keep the two runways, those decisions came from exploration. This is how you would connect this site to some of the other features in Southern California.

How about a connection to the community?

The most important function is for people to come together—in other cities you have streets where that happens. This is not a very pedestrian oriented part of the world, down here. The park is sustainable in many ways—ecologically, financially—and it raises expectations about what a community place can be. Irvine now has 3 million residents; it's grown so quickly. There are over 4,000 acres to the park, of which 2,600 is getting developed as a series of other developments. There's some education, some housing, some single family attached housing and multifamily housing, so it's also becoming a community that surrounds this park—Lennar doing the development.

Tell us about some of the different ways that that community will be able to use the park.

There's an area that we call a bosque, which is like an arboretum. It will serve as a filter between the flexible area of the park and the surrounding community. We've also carved out a few gardens, because we wanted a mix of large spaces and intimate spaces w/in the park. The Cultural Terrace will have museums, a multi-cultural center and a conference center. These are all considerations because you need a park that's also

financially sustainable.

And what about ecological sustainability?

There are several sustainable features —energy, water, people, soil, plants—a tremendous opportunity exists for restoration. We're going to be way out in terms of our sustainability goals—everything from permeability to materials recycling, to wood trusses on a lot of the buildings being used to build bridges, the irrigation systems, the plant material that's all friendly to Southern California. We're going to be considering ways of harnessing solar power so that we can largely be independent, the buildings are embedded in landscape so they have huge planted roofs, and we lease 60 acres to a company that does composting. Clippings from park operations get used for mulch and the old concrete is crushed so that it can be used as road base.

The runways are such a significant feature; what was the impact of choosing to include them?

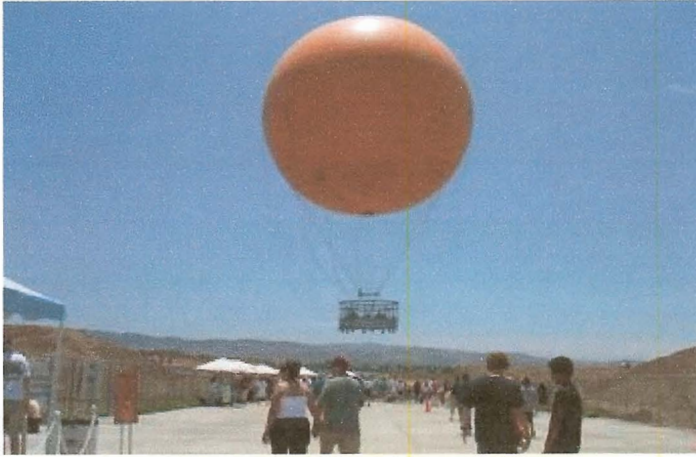
We have a timeline on one of the taxiways that goes north south; it leads into where Metrolink stops. That connects us to the rest of the city. With the runways, the scale of them is amazing. And it's very poignant. Airplanes took off, went to far off lands, and came back – the people who landed and left were people who honored our country, who really believed in what they were doing, and from a formal point of view they're just beautiful spaces.

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Visitors can observe the park's progress by riding a balloon 400 feet in the air.

Photos: Jade Chang (unless otherwise noted)



An Aerial view of the progress at the Orange County Great Park
Courtesy Ken Smith Workshop West

