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Enrique Norten, architect

Architect envisions a park all will embrace

By SONYA SMITH
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Enrique Norten

Great Park architect

Enrique Norten has a simple, but difficult, goal for the Great Park.

He wants to connect Orange County.

"The county is mall-driven," he said in a phone interview from New York. "There are not many places to socialize, except for beaches and malls."

Norten is not just the park's architect of buildings – he wants to construct relationships.

But how?

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Norten fell into architecture.

In college he said he was like everybody else – confused about what to do with his life.

Through a process of elimination he picked design school. Architecture followed.

Looking back, he notices a tendency towards design.

"In my childhood I was interested in how things were put together – I would take things apart just to see how they worked."

Now, with architecture, Norten can make places work.

"That's my passion, my love. Architecture is where I feel I best serve my community," he said.

His career grew into a professional practice that he started in 1981 in Mexico City as a partner. His own firm, TEN Arquitectos, followed.

Norten's designs have won many awards, including the Architectural Prize of the National Fund for the Arts (in 1990), the Progressive Architecture Awards (in 1994, 1995 and 1998), and the Leonardo da Vinci World Award of Arts (in 2005).

His current projects include designing the new Guggenheim Museum in Guadalajara, redesigning and improving the public spaces and an academic building at Rutgers University in New Jersey to better interact with the nearby riverfront, a 34-story building in New York's Harlem Park with one wavy face of steel and glass, and three projects in Miami that will be adjacent to other projects being created by Frank Gehry and the team of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron.

Sure, the man known as one of the hottest names in architecture is busy. But Norten's work at the old El Toro base will focus on Orange County's needs, he said.

Site-specific architecture is Norten's strong point. In Miami his designs are touted as adding the needed touches to the skyline and in Harlem his structure is expected to define the community.

"The site, community, culture and history are the most important things in working on a project," he said. "Architecture is not transportable."

The flat nature and immense size of the old base is what Norten says makes the park project a "fantastic opportunity."

His ideas for the park include:

- Buildings within the landscape. Rather than regular buildings that are separate from nature – Norten's buildings in the cultural terrace area of the park will be tucked into the land. This, he said, will allow the architecture to reflect the power of the landscape.
- A conservatory bridge. Norten's firm is designing two vehicle bridges and seven pedestrian bridges to carry visitors over the park's canyon. One of the bridges will not just bring people into the botanical gardens – it will be a conservatory for plants and part of the gardens. The white bridge's structure will have various-sized holes. Small holes will let in little sunlight for shade-loving plants, and large holes will supply other plants with more sunlight.

- A cultural gathering space. Norten's main space in the park is the cultural terrace – an area surrounding the park's 24-acre lake. Six museums will be connected via a Jacaranda tree-lined walkway. An amphitheater and other uses will surround the lake. This is expected to be the key gathering space in the park.

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Norten plans to bring the county's rich and poor, pro-airport and anti-airport, and young and old together in the park's cultural terrace.

The park, he says, belongs to the county – and by creating a gathering space outside a mall or beach he hopes everyone can find refuge and make friends.

"This is really about open space, open democratic space. This is the space of visitors and of everyone who lives in the county. I hope that people will embrace it and make it theirs."

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