

Thursday, February 2, 2006

Great Park will test Smith's management skill

He plans to integrate themes on his largest scale yet.

By JEFF ROWE

The Orange County Register

IRVINE – A small volunteer project turned out to be emotionally pivotal in the selection of a master designer for the Great Park and illustrative of what will guide the park's creation.

But this project and others by New York architect Ken Smith also raise questions about the skills, experience and architectural values he brings to the design of the Great Park - the mix of wilderness areas, athletic fields, museums, farms, schools, shops and houses planned for the former El Toro Marine base.

Two design juries saluted Smith's canyon, meadows and wetlands vision for the 1,347-acre public portion of the Great Park, and the park board generally liked other park projects Smith and his team had completed in New York. Last month, the Knowlton School of Architecture at Ohio State University produced a book published by Princeton Architectural Press on Ken Smith as part of the school's series on landscape architecture. It details some of Smith's better-known work - the artificial roof garden at the New York Museum of Modern Art and the East River Ferry Landings, also in New York.

But the project that helped tip the votes to Smith in the design contest was a 16-foot memorial pool in the American Express building in New York remembering the company's employees killed in the World Trade Center attack. That won over Great Park Corp. Chairman Larry Agran when he visited Smith in New York in November. Then, after the board agonized for two meetings over the three designer finalists, Agran described how the American Express project had moved him to tears.

All but one of his colleagues then voted for Smith.

The American Express project is an 11-sided pool in the lobby of the company's headquarters. Each side represents an employee who died in the attack. Water drops representing the tears of colleagues continuously fall into the pool.

The project illustrates some of the values, principles and practices Smith can be expected to bring to the design.

Keen attention to the local environment: Smith's projects are "very rooted to where they are located," said Elizabeth Asawa, a senior associate in Smith's New York office.

In the East River Ferry Landings, Smith and two other architects created an urban walkway that incorporated original grasses in planters along a section of dock.

Pragmatism: When Smith was told the natural water flows might not be sufficient for the series of wetlands his original design showed on the west side of the park, he promptly reduced their scope.

Passion: "His eyes get real wide, his eyebrows go up and you get this real electricity," said Pat Fuscoe, president of Fuscoe Engineering in Irvine, which has been working with the Great Park Corp. on the practicalities of building the park. Fuscoe will work closely with Smith on the design.

Wit: A New York Times article on Smith in 2002 referred to Smith's "Seussian mind," a reference to Smith's childhood affection for Dr. Seuss books, children's stories whose animated characters subtly help children learn about numbers and other concepts. "His work makes you smile," said Steven Handel, a Rutgers University ecologist and now part of Smith's Great Park team, about the designer.

Attention to detail: Agran said that after the official presentations to the board last summer, Smith and his team went back to the old base to examine it further. They came to see their task as environmental restoration and a redefinition of how

people relate to nature, Agran said. He found a whimsical quality to Smith's work that was appealing. At the Great Park, for example, Smith is proposing keeping several large orange balloons aloft over the center of the site to give the flat park a constant visual reference.

Engaging as the plans may be, questions remain about Smith's ability to pull together multiple themes and to pull together all of them on a far-larger project than he previously has developed.

Diane Ghirardo, an architecture professor at USC and consultant to the Great Park Corp., says Smith's team is "untested" on such a large project and inexperienced in dealing with live plants in public parks.

Ghirardo also questioned the worth of Smith's signature piece, the 2-mile-long, 30-foot-deep canyon that would traverse the southern section of the Great Park, "given the presence of many natural canyons in the vicinity."

But the just-published book on Smith says his work "at its most refined and thought-provoking has an irony to it." For example, at a volunteer project at a public school in New York, Smith created planters out of dumpsters.

The book also says that while "Smith does not promote environmentalism per se, he is an environmentalist in subtle ways while not making a moral distinction of it." The book also said "Smith's design approach reintegrates often obscure and fragmented sites into the public realm in celebratory ways."

Other architects also speak highly of Smith.

"I respect him greatly," said Sean O'Malley, managing partner for the Laguna Beach office of the SWA Group, a landscape architecture firm with offices and projects around the world. "He's an artist, so he is very expressive in his work and speaks to that." A landscape architect, he says, must "listen to what the land is telling you about drainage, topography and circulation." He says Smith's firm does just that, and it is reflected in his design for the Great Park.

Few seem to question Smith's creativity; it's the practical work of assembling such a big project that likely will keep Great Park Corp. board members nervous for a few years.