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Ken Smith, lead designer

Ken Smith will create the Great Park out of a giant tract of urban space.

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He listens to Chinese opera on his laptop – "The Peony Pavilion," a Ming dynasty masterpiece described as "more than the erotic story of a teenage ghost and her dream lover" and that's 20 hours long.

It's a very hot day here on what used to be the El Toro Marine base – think hellfire and dragon's breath – but he wears raven black from head to toe. He could certainly take a few quiet minutes for lunch – he's the boss, after all – but he scarfs down spicy chicken soup while hiking the dilapidated stretch of concrete between the lonely lunch counter and his office in Building 83.

"In New York," says Ken Smith, master designer of the Orange County Great Park, "you learn to walk down the street and eat at the same time."

Orange County, meet the man who will forever carve his imprint upon you, the man who will move 6 million cubic yards of earth to cast and sculpt and shape you, the man who, like the wizard of Oz, will ransack his bag of tricks until he finally, finally gives you a heart.

But before we get to all that, we must address his spectacles. Ken Smith's face is, at first glance, simply a vehicle for his glasses. They are a startling statement: Thick and black and pie-plate round, they scream hipster and science geek, beatnik and Bohemian, Harry Potter and Garrison Keillor all at the same time.

Not everyone can pull off glasses like this. And even though he was once an Iowa farm boy, Smith can.

In the ultramod design world, Smith has long been a wunderkind, known for small, eclectic projects in New York City, particularly the Museum of Modern Art's rooftop garden and an eternally weeping pool memorializing the American Express employees killed on Sept. 11. The Great Park's tremendous scale seemed "out of his element" and beyond his expertise, critics said, but his vision of a 2-mile-long, manmade canyon as the park's centerpiece caught the imagination of the Great Park's board, and Smith was awarded the biggest public-service project of its kind in the nation earlier this year.

At more than 1,100 acres – bigger than New York's Central Park – the Great Park will take decades to "grow," and Smith's team will earn \$10 million in fees for creating its master plan.

So here we are, in Building 83 of the old El Toro Marine base. Once it was the domain of military commanders and shook when fighter planes screamed into the sky.

Today, it's Smith's "Design Studio West," seemingly swallowed by a deteriorating base that has turned eerily quiet – so quiet that coyotes sometimes roam the former runways.

Some of Building 83's once-sterile white walls have been painted a shocking orange. In the enormous room where much of the creative work happens, every other acoustic tile has been plucked from the ceiling, revealing the building's guts and giving the whole place an industrial feel.

Smith is drawing. He bends over a collection of five lunchroom-size tables pushed together to create an enormous work surface. With ruler and pencil, he draws in details: the rookeries in the wetlands that will attract wildlife, the boardwalk that will allow visitors to meander through it, the swells and contractions of the canyon itself, the locations of the footbridges that will cross it.

One of these footbridges will seem suspended in the trees, allowing visitors to imagine they're tip-toeing atop a forest. Another, the Bridge of Seven Turns, will undulate precisely that many times. The idea is to slow you down and lead you toward the unexpected, he says. Smith is a man who gets excited by the possibilities of a munitions bunker, who marches down a dilapidated stretch of concrete bristling with weeds and declares that there's actually something soothing in nature reclaiming her own.

As the shock of his upset victory has worn off, critics have begun praising Smith's plan for its simplicity, for the way it integrates El Toro's aviation history into its future, for the way it flows into the landscape and melds with the mountains beyond.

He is compared to Frederick Law Olmstead, who won the job of designing Central Park before he had much of a track record. He'll visit with first lady Laura Bush at the White House this fall, as a finalist for a National Design Award. His work is the subject of a recent book.

None of this seems to impress him much.

Smith works best in the early morning, after downing a few of the four or five cups of coffee he drinks each day. That, at least, lets him get some real work done before the visitors start descending: politicians, members of the Great Park board, media types. It can be relentless. Smith has been thrust forward as the project's public face: He presents extremely well, has his spiel down pat, says the right things.

That's important just about now. As Design Studio West was shifting into high gear, bombshells started dropping – most notably a grand jury report blasting the city of Irvine for "hijacking" control of the park board of directors from the county at large. Irvine betrayed the public trust by seizing ultimate control, the grand jury said, and urged the county to consider suing to regain some power over how to fashion Orange County's heart.

Smith knows that he holds this heart is in his hands, and if he ever hopes to see it beating, he must maneuver deftly around political turmoil. Lessons lay in the attempt to rebuild the World Trade Center site, he has said: the importance of being a good salesman (the winning architect wore an American flag pin and made the main tower 1,776 feet tall); of having a striking idea (the winner's proposal to preserve the towers' surviving slurry wall was brilliant, Smith has said); and how quickly even great ideas can get mired in local wrangling. (The rebuild is languishing as politicians, landlords and the victims' families bicker.)

In the competition to redesign Ground Zero, Smith was on the team that finished second.

"All public projects are born out of politics, driven by politics, inherently involve politics," Smith says. "My job is to stay clear of it. It's the third rail. Touch it and die."

So Smith bears down on the work: designing the park's fine details, smiling for the visitors, selling his vision. The Great Park will boast museums, performance areas, sports facilities, satellite college campuses.

"The change in Orange County over the past 15 years has been shocking, and the change over the next 15 years is going to be even more shocking," Smith says. "The big open vistas, which are really the history of Orange County, will be gone. That's why I think this space is going to be so important. It's an amazing moment, to be here on the cusp of such change."

"This is a really important project," he says. "The project of a lifetime."

Nowhere in America is a swath of land this massive available in an urban setting – and there may never be another opportunity like this again. "It's a fluke of history. Sometimes, we luck out," he says.

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SECLUSION: The old runways are among Ken Smith's favorite spots on the former Marine base.

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