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Mia Lehrer, designer

Mia Lehrer brings attention to detail to design team.

BY JEFF ROWE
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Although it would seem about as distant from the Great Park as Mars, Union Station in Los Angeles offers some clues as to the design principles, aesthetic touches and artistic values that will define and flavor the Great Park.

The rail and bus station is one of Los Angeles' most architecturally significant sites, and Mia Lehrer and her team are credited with bringing the old building back to life while preserving the spirit of its 1920s origins.

Lehrer is on landscape planner Ken Smith's design team, which in October will present a detailed plan for the old El Toro air base. Among other elements, it's expected to feature a two-mile-long canyon, a lake, amphitheater, botanic garden and sports park.

But, as with every architect, Lehrer's design techniques have been influenced by her past work.

In 1999, she won the job of refurbishing the old train station, which felt "tired and abandoned," she said. Her plan prescribed the restoration of the original two courtyards, redesign of the front of the station and the addition of a restaurant. The station feels a bit like a movie set, which it often is.

Once the larger elements were determined, Lehrer turned to the details. She brought in 80 mature palms to frame the front of the building, which looks across Alameda Street to Olvera Street, site of the city's original settlement and now a showplace of Mexican culture.

In the courtyards, Lehrer planted a mix of avocados, oranges and jacaranda trees, the same trees that had given travelers in the pre-jet age visual and olfactory confirmation that they had arrived in California.

To make sure the bricks on the widened promenade in front matched the narrow ones used elsewhere at the station, Lehrer found the company that made the original bricks and persuaded them to make enough new bricks for the project.

Union Station now feels classically modern, like an old car with an overhauled engine and new interior appointments in the original style.

Surrounding Union Station now are hundreds of new condos and apartments; they replace parking lots.

To Lehrer, the Union Station challenge is much like that facing Great Park designers – maintaining a sense of heritage while creating a contemporary, forward-looking park. The Union Station parallel is the particularly striking at the Amtrak/Metrolink terminal at the southeast corner of the Great Park. There, a more expansive station is planned, the hub of a village of thousands of people who will use buses and trains to get to work.

Lehrer also hopes the Great Park transit station will attract the same meld of activities that Union Station does – celebrations, weddings, filming – a panoply of community events.

In the interconnected world of big project urban architecture, Lehrer and Ken Smith's paths intertwined without intersecting – until now. Smith asked her to join his team before he submitted his original proposal.

They both graduated from Harvard University's landscape design school, but at different times. But they had kept track of each other's work and Lehrer's reputation in Los Angeles was solid.

"She's one of the most significant landscape architects in Los Angeles," said Tim Durfee, an architect with Durfee/Regn in Los Angeles.

"In terms of doing large-scale open space project – probably no one is better equipped in Southern California to do that," said Alan Loomis, principal urban designer for the city of Glendale. If the L.A. River project proceeds as Lehrer and others envision it, the park will provide a natural link from Glendale to Griffith Park.

Lehrer had difficulty listing the last movie she attended or any other recent recreational activities. In addition to the Great Park, she is creating the master plan a 32-mile stretch of the Los Angeles River, sections of which now are cluttered with scruffy industrial buildings, warehouses, weeds and trash. In the summer heat, the river itself trickles along a concrete channel wide enough for a two-lane road.

But to Lehrer, the possibilities are limitless. She envisions parks, promenades and other activities. "It could be like the Seine," she says, referring to the river in France that provides the ambiance for the city's famed left and right banks.

Lehrer studied in France, which enabled her to learn French, one of six languages she speaks.

Lehrer also is working on a Great Park-sized project in Baldwin Hills. It's a hilly, 1,400-acre plot, mostly defined by oil rigs. Under Lehrer's plan it will become a mix of sports fields, restored native vegetation and wildlife corridors, much like the Great Park.



Great Park landscape designer Mia Lehrer. "She's one of the most significant landscape architects in Los Angeles," said Tim Durfee, an architect with Durfee/Regn in Los Angeles.

MIGUEL VASCONCELLOS, IRVINE WORLD NEWS

Mia Lehrer

Mia Lehrer + Associates, Los Angeles

Birthplace: El Salvador

Languages: English, Spanish, German, Portuguese, French, Hebrew

Schooling: Bachelor's in environmental design, Tufts University

Master's: Harvard University, landscape architecture

Design principles: Genuine, committed, environmentally responsible, community responsive

Typical workday: 18 hours

Favorite park: Echo Park, Los Angeles

Hobbies: movies, museums but could not recall last film seen

Last book read: The World is Flat, Thomas Friedman

Heroes: Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park in New York; her father, who had a "tremendous moral compass."