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Up, Up, and Away

The author rides a balloon over the nascent Orange County Great Park with Ken Smith.

By Jade Chang

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“Everyone kept asking which direction north was, so we put that in,” landscape architect Ken Smith says wryly, gesturing down at a giant N built into the ground. Its right leg extends into an oversize directional arrow, pointing off to our left. We are 400 feet in the air, 40 miles south of Los Angeles, in a donut-shaped metal basket held aloft by a giant orange helium balloon.

Wearing a neat all-black ensemble topped with a fedora, his only concession to the California sun, New York-based Smith gazes out at the decommissioned El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. By 2010 his master plan—which preserves some of the base’s airstrips while recovering the site’s original natural features—will transform 1,347 acres of this space into the Orange County Great Park. The ambitious public project is slated to include a 2.5-mile-long canyon, botanical gardens, playing fields, a cultural terrace, a veterans’ memorial, an unearthed river, and a wildlife corridor from the forest to the shore. “Hard to believe,” he says, shaking his head. Smith smiles out at the balloon’s other passengers, all clad in distinctly local combinations of flip-flops and tank tops. They don’t know that they’re riding with the park’s master designer, who assembled the team—including L.A.-based Mia Lehrer + Associates, ecologist Steve Handel, and Mexico City-based design firm TEN Arquitectos—that won the project commission last January. They’re just happy to be here, on one of the free rides that officials are hoping will sustain community interest as the slow process of park-building proceeds.

It is easy to lose your internal compass up here, especially when the 4,700-acre base is in such a state of flux. At the moment, patches of it are covered with RVs in storage, piles of rich brown compost, tons of crushed runway concrete waiting to be repurposed on-site, half-built residential neighborhoods, and bulldozed mounds of dirt that will soon begin morphing into the biggest public park in Southern California. “A performance lawn and soccer fields might go in within a year,” Smith says. “And we’re going to start filling in the canyon and wildlife corridor with native coastal scrub like oaks, California cottonwood, walnut trees, elderberry, and alders.”

The idea for the balloon came up as the team tried to think of a symbol for the park. Someone mentioned a similar attraction at Potsdamer Platz, in Berlin, and it was instantly clear that in this case the best symbol would be the most obvious: What says “Orange County” better than a huge floating orange, visible from the freeway? It will remain as a permanent icon, though by next year the park may begin charging for rides. “I was also influenced by the Forbidden City [in Beijing],” Smith says. “Once you’re inside, everything else fades away; you look up, and there’s only sky.” As the park begins to grow in, the balloon launchpad will be surrounded by trees, giving visitors a similar feeling. But here, in the new OC, they’ll be able to float upward and take in the park, the mountains, the city, and the sea.

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Now that construction of the Orange County Great Park is under way, visitors can observe its progress by riding a balloon 400 feet in the air, where they have 25-mile views.
courtesy Ken Smith Workshop West

