



BRANCHING OUT East Coast-based landscape architect James Corner at the Viceroy Hotel in Santa Monica.

## Park de Triomphe?

**Internationally renowned landscape architect James Corner is set to build Santa Monica's most important new outdoor space in decades. But first he's got to win over its notoriously outspoken citizenry**

| By Gary Baum |  
| Photography by Peden + Munk |

Last spring James Corner beat out hometown hero Frank Gehry, among several other big architectural names including Shigeru Ban, for the opportunity to create a seven-acre park in Santa Monica on a prime, city-owned parcel. His white-hot East Coast firm, Field Operations, recently gained fame for its role in developing Manhattan's much-celebrated High Line elevated greenbelt (alongside Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the New Yorkers tapped to conjure Eli Broad's upcoming museum on Grand Avenue downtown). Now Corner's in the midst of negotiating an extensive public-approval process that could sharpen his vision for the site—or dull it.

"Santa Monica is a very, shall we say, *colorful* community, with a lot of contested views about what public space should be," says Corner, 50, of the enclave's varying overlapping and clashing constituencies,

from cycling proponents and dog lovers to native plant boosters and homeless advocates. "So we were a little nervous going in." Until securing this commission, Field Operations' most well-known L.A. moment had been its audacious 2006 land-swap proposal, conjured in tandem with local Pritzker Prize winner Thom Mayne. That plan involved turning what's now the 32-acre Los Angeles State Historic Park just northeast of Chinatown (at the time, it was Lauren Bon's *Not A Cornfield* land-art project) into the home of a new Dodger Stadium, while returning Chavez Ravine to nature. It was quickly and decisively dismissed.

The land in question now is what will eventually be known as the Palisades Garden Walk, located across the street from Santa Monica's City Hall and just a block from the beach. Several months ago Corner's team presented



TAKING ROOT Field Operations' most recent renderings of the planned Palisades Garden Walk project. The site is located immediately south of the 10 Freeway, across the street from Santa Monica City Hall, where a companion greenery space, to be called the Town Square, will also be designed by the firm.

three initial schematics for the site, which have since been refined to a single intricate yet freewheeling \$25 million plan. In a single stroke, he hopes to knit together the currently isolated civic center area with the far more bustling section of downtown to the north, as well as make the site an appealing crowd nexus in a city that already boasts a surfeit of other popular draws.

"That's the biggest challenge," says Corner, who notes that the square-ish lot abutting Ocean Avenue (formerly the home of think-tank RAND's headquarters) contrasts with the linear layouts of the nearby Pier, Promenade, bluff-top Palisades Park—and, of course, the beach itself. "It's surrounded by successful sites of public engagement. So how do you compete?"

Well, according to the current iteration of the plan, with a mix of meandering paths, indigenous ecology (Torrey pines, coastal live oaks, lots and lots of succulents) and, perhaps most intriguingly, dramatically varied topography. Taking a page from the High Line, which has received plaudits for offering a unique array of literally heightened viewing perspectives (including an amphitheater-style benched seating arrangement behind a large Plexiglas window revealing the exhilarating onrush of traffic below at Tenth Avenue Square), Corner is calling for a series of man-made promontories throughout the park, all with carefully choreographed lookout spots. To underscore the point, renderings include massive rectangular "frames" to mark the postcard-worthy vistas.

So far, the public input sessions have yielded mostly positive responses, although a contingent of cyclists are concerned that bike paths in the final plan will be relegated solely to the project's perimeter. Construction is expected to begin in the spring of 2012, to be completed around 2014, just as the in-progress Expo Line light rail system finally reaches its terminus at the corner of Colorado Avenue and Fourth Street, only a few hundred yards from the park.

Corner, now an undisputed superstar in his field, has been compared to Frederick Law Olmsted, the legendary designer of New York's Central Park. It's a fitting analogy in that Olmsted's naturalistic pastoral approach (he prescribed wild arbors in lieu of then-trendy manicured greens) was a break

from the sensibilities of the past. Meanwhile, Corner's context-concerned, postmodern M.O.—"I don't have a signature style, just a way of seeing that's very place-specific"—is its own giant leap into an age when the presumed authenticity of "organic design" reigns supreme. "Jim is really at the top of his game," says Ken Smith, mastermind behind the Orange County Great Park and member of the architecture jury that selected Corner for Santa Monica. "He's in tune with the times."

Such insistent sensitivity, of course, is arguably an ideal (even necessary) match for the so-called People's Republic of Santa Monica, where the city expects nothing less of the future Palisades Garden Walk than a thoroughly fair-and-balanced reflection of its own ultra-open-minded (if hydra-headed) essence. "The park is one of the key public improvement projects that I've seen [come along] in the last 20 years that I've been living here," says Joan Ling, who runs the Community Corporation of Santa Monica, a non-profit partnering on a large-scale mixed-use project immediately south of the site. "It's really of critical importance that it turns out right." ■