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GRAND INTERVENTION

Pump genius into our park

By Martin Kaplan

THE ANNOUNCEMENT LAST WEEK that architect Frank O. Gehry has been asked to design a 40- to 50-story skyscraper, to be built in the space next to his Disney Hall as part of downtown Los Angeles' \$1.8-billion Grand Avenue project, offers a new opportunity for the city to focus on the park that will be created in the Gehry building's shadows.

Running from City Hall to the top of Bunker Hill, the [16-acre space](#) will be "the new front lawn of the city," its proponents say — "our Central Park." [The Related Cos.](#), developers of the Grand Avenue project, will pay for the park with a \$50-million lease advance on the land underlying the project. Long before the sure-to-be iconic Gehry building was announced, the park-to-be had attracted a wish list of civic hopes, including cultural performances, political gatherings, farmers markets and pickup sports games.

But will it rise to those hopes? Are those the boldest proposals this city has to offer?

THINK AGAIN, PLEASE

Downtown's asphalt is our backyard, so The Times Opinion Manufacturing Division has embraced the accompanying essay's call for a new round of brainstorming about what to do with the 16-acre park that will be the Grand Avenue project's centerpiece.

Martin Kaplan of USC's Annenberg School and director of the Norman Lear Center will shepherd submissions. Strong entries will appear on the Lear Center website — www.learcenter.org.

Current's website — latimes.com/current — will link to that site and the strongest submissions will appear in these pages.

Contributors will not be compensated, and they will retain all rights to their proposals.

Proposals, from teams or individuals, should restrict themselves to the park's planned footprint and can address landscape design, technology, transportation ... virtually any aspect of the park, big or small.

They can take the form of text, drawings, photographs and/or Web-friendly content such as animations or virtual tours.

Theoretical discussions are welcome, but only as elements of proposals.

If you think redeveloping downtown is a bad idea, this is not for you.

Present Grand Avenue plans, public comments and other resources are linked at www.learcenter.org. Submit entries by e-mail to enter@usc.edu or mail them to the Norman Lear Center, USC, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0281.

Time for a loving civic intervention

And are the developer's focus groups really the best way to find the best suggestions?

My bet is that it's not too late to bust things open for an eruption of creative energy, to ventilate and galvanize and democratize the design process, to invite citizens of Los Angeles, architecture fans, design junkies and imagineers from around the world to brainstorm truly breakthrough ideas for our 21st century civic space.

Architecture is a kind of public theater. You playwrights and screenwriters, you set designers and choreographers, you producers and impresarios — what could you do with Los Angeles as a stage?

And how about you Hollywood lighting designers — how would you create drama without turning us into Las Vegas?

[David Rockwell](#), you're a master of narrative architecture. What story could the design of our park tell?

[Bran Ferren](#), [Bill Mitchell](#), [Adam Powell](#) and you other digital wizards out there: How could our park use Wi-Fi, HyperSonic Sound, pod-casting and the other cool tech in your toolkit to turn the public sphere into an information commons, a knowledge network, a virtual performance space?

The city's artists must have plenty of ideas, from subversive to sublime. [Robbie Conal](#)? [Ed Ruscha](#)? [Robert Graham](#)? [Mek One](#)?

And where are all the visionary urbanists? [Manuel Castells](#)? [Witold Rybczynski](#)? [Norman Klein](#)? [Kevin Starr](#)? How about conceiving a park for this era when the boundaries between work and leisure, entertainment and politics, consumption and citizenship have never been more porous.

[Elizabeth Moule](#), [Stefanos Polyzoides](#) and you other [New Urbanists](#): Isn't the Grand Avenue park a matchless opportunity for your movement to strut its stuff?

What about all you professors and students of architecture, planning and landscape design? Surely you could build on or better the 50 international proposals for a Los Angeles Civic Park solicited by the [LA H* Urban Bureau](#), a group of artists and architects, in 2003.

And how would you Zen garden designers create silence in the midst of urbanity?

You commuters and loft-dwellers, you pedestrians and picnickers, you Westsiders and Valleyites, you school groups and teachers, you protest marchers and soap-box orators, you in the pueblo and you in the hood: Don't you want a hand in making this park a magnet for you?

Please don't be discouraged that the park already seems like a done deal.

The upside of the planning process so far has been its benevolent despotism, which has overcome inertia and infighting to push the project to this point. The [Grand Avenue Committee](#), chaired by billionaire developer and philanthropist [Eli Broad](#), has pulled together the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency, the county Board of Supervisors and other city and state players.

Instead of holding a design competition, which would have involved asking developers to submit physical plans, a Grand Avenue Committee-created Joint Planning Authority invited companies to submit their qualifications to handle the project. Finalists were then asked for "design thinking": not plans, but a demonstration of how they would organize their creative process if they got the contract.

It was only after the [Related Cos. won](#) "exclusive right to negotiate" agreements last August that the architects and designers on its team, which include a number of stars, began the project.

At the same time, the Grand Avenue Committee launched a series of [community outreach sessions](#) — two in 2004 to comment on "[design principles](#)," and five in 2005 to comment on preliminary plans. These focus groups resulted in laundry lists of dreams for downtown. In May, the developers gave the public its first look at [detailed plans](#). Some called the design exciting. Others criticized it as too beholden to commercial interests, too inward-looking, not ambitious enough.

The developer's drawings and models are still short on detail, but the scheme has been forwarded to the City Council, the county Board of Supervisors and the

Community Redevelopment Agency for approval.

More focus groups will be scheduled. But as any official knows, a public comment process can be a means to create the appearance of openness without letting citizens make any decisions. And there's a difference between asking the public to comment on what the developers' chefs serve up and inviting the most awesome imaginations on the planet to come into the kitchen and cook.

This may be impractical for the commercial and residential real estate part of the Grand Avenue development. But for the park — a civic space, owned and meant to be enjoyed by us all — the current process seems at best paternalistic and at worst self-defeating. It may be a sign of hard times that we've had to turn over to a private development group the financing of a civic park, but it makes no sense to completely outsource its design to them and then hope for the best.

So here's calling for a raucous competition for the design of our city's front lawn. At a minimum, it would give the developers new designs to try to top, and it would give the public alternatives to compare. It's in the Grand Avenue Committee's own interest to encourage a riot of park proposals. Why wouldn't it want to embrace this ferment and prove that its choice of developers is giving Los Angeles the best there is?

Warning that finance had gotten ahead of design, a July 2004 Times editorial said that the design "is still at the grandiose-talk stage, with disconcertingly few details and dismayingly little public debate over what one of the largest developments in downtown history should look like."

The year since then has done too little to change that. If the Grand Avenue powers-that-be don't want to open up at least the park design process to a dazzling competition and a robust debate, I say it's time for a loving civic intervention.

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