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LA Times Op-Ed: What Kind of Park Does L.A. Need?

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Save the snark for another public folly. Sure, the just-revealed plans for the Grand Avenue civic park, which will run downhill from the Music Center to Spring Street, come nowhere near to living up to the hype that accompanied the park's announcement three years ago — “a world-class destination,” “the new ‘Central Park’ of Los Angeles,” “the most dramatic public space in all of Los Angeles.” But if it gets built, the view from Music Center Plaza to City Hall will be much better than what's there now, and the city will get a new stage for civic engagement, which may turn out to be more important.

When the 16-acre park was announced as part of the \$3-billion Grand Avenue redevelopment project, what troubled me was the delegation of the civic park's design to a developer, Related Cos. True, Related will pony up the \$56 million to pay for a “base” park, but the land belongs to the city's citizens, not its developers. I was concerned that an opportunity would be lost if the design emerged from a sole-source contract, rather than from a competition that would tap into L.A.'s creative energy.

That's why the Norman Lear Center at the USC Annenberg School, together with the *Los Angeles Times*, launched a rump park design competition, which ultimately attracted more than 300 proposals. I also wheedled the Grand Avenue Committee, Related and the design team it hired to conduct a public charrette, to Webcast its outreach events, to use online visualization tools and polling, and to consider the unofficial design submissions, plus the ideas that the Lear center solicited from architects and planners around the country. We called our effort “Grand Intervention.” (You can browse the imagined parks at GrandIntervention.org)

Did it make a difference? There was no way to change the biggest constraint on the park project: its low budget ceiling of \$56 million. More than half of the cost of the “base” design unveiled Tuesday by Rios Clemente Hale Studios is infrastructure — relocating ramps to underground parking lots, making the landscape weight-bearing, providing electricity and plumbing.

The remaining money will not be spent on spectacular public art, such as the mirrored “endless orchard” suggested by one design contestant in Grand Intervention. Nor is there enough money for grand gestures, such as the proposal by two Cal Poly Pomona students to connect the park to the Los Angeles River. The Arthur J. Will Memorial Fountain in the Civic Center mall will be more accessible, both visually and by foot, but there is nothing especially iconic in the proposed design for the 16-acre park, nothing jaw-dropping like Anish Kapoor’s “Cloud Gate” in Chicago’s hugely expensive Millennium Park. Instead, once the new infrastructure is paid for, the remaining money will be used to regrade the site — so pedestrians can more easily walk the length of the park — and for landscaping — so the viewsheds and gathering places will work. Within those limits, it’s a minor miracle that the designers found room in the budget for water features, sun and shade gardens, curated mini-parks and WiFi.

The knock on the park design is that it’s prosaic. Even the “enhanced” version — which depends on raising an additional \$50 million or so, and which adds, among other things, a cafe, a carousel and a sinuous flaneur-friendly bridge over Broadway — won’t turn this downtown hill into the world-class destination we were promised. Why would an Eli Broad spring for a \$25-million Jeff Koons sculpture, the argument goes, or why would the sultan of Dubai give Los Angeles a \$100-million ski slope, unless the setting for their jewels were already as wow-worthy as the Hollywood sign or the beach?

But to focus on starchitecture and aesthetic drama is to forget the “civic” in the park’s name. This place will be a stage, a setting, a platform for spectacle, an arena intended for every kind of public play and political performance that the city can muster. Aaron Paley, who runs L.A.’s Community Arts Resources, did the initial dreamwork on what kind of planned programming and spontaneous eruptions could activate the park, and San Francisco consultant Mary McCue will try to figure out how to manage and maintain a 24/7 festival of free, subsidized and pay-for fun. Of course there’s a risk of commercialization, but Bryant Park in New York seems to have worked out how to marry public and private interests, and we’ve got way better weather than Manhattan.

The plans’ emphasis on programming is born of budget necessity. But sometimes, constraints breed opportunities. What would make this park an only-in-L.A. 21st century place? To answer that is to answer, “What makes L.A. L.A.?” Once you get past the climate, surely the reply is — the people.

This city is the center of the most diverse, vibrant, raucous agglomeration of different cultures on the face of the globe. The more chances that Angelenos have to see who we look like, the better. Such commercial spaces as The Grove and Americana at Brand shouldn’t be the only places we get a gander of ourselves. Even in a car-culture — or especially in one — we need more reasons and more places to look in the civic mirror. Even in the age of cyberspace — or

especially in it “we need more opportunities to rediscover the unique properties of presence, of non-virtual reality, of “meat-space.”

Geographical segregation along economic and ethnic lines is the default option, the centrifugal motion of L.A. life. Drawing us toward a central park, to play with one another, requires not just a cool place, but cool stuff to do together once we get there.

If you have an idea for the kinds of year-round activities that should go on at the new civic park, especially ones that don’t require new sugar daddies, this is the moment to love-bomb Related with suggestions. (You can send them to enter@usc.edu, and we’ll make sure the developer sees them.)

The center of gravity of the discussion about the park is inexorably moving from what it will look like, to who gets to decide what goes on there. The designers are offering a reasonably well-made stage.. Now it’s up to us to write a script for the Grand Avenue park that we ourselves would want to be cast in.

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