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When a riot is a good thing

By Martin Kaplan

IN JULY, CURRENT published my essay inviting people — amateurs and professionals alike — to suggest ideas and designs for the new 16-acre “civic park” that, as part of the Grand Avenue redevelopment project, will be created in the spaces between Los Angeles City Hall and the Music Center on Bunker Hill.

I instigated this outpouring because I felt the creative process had been insufficiently open. If you think that the developer of the \$1.8-billion Grand Avenue redo got the job in 2004 because it won a design competition, think again. And if you believe that the official plans include a design competition before groundbreaking a year from now, I’ve got a bridge to nowhere I’d like to sell you.

There’s a reason there was no design competition in 2004: The winning developer, New York-based Related Cos., like the other firms bidding for the project, was expressly prohibited from presenting design proposals as part of its pitch. What developers were asked to tell billionaire Eli Broad and the Grand Avenue Committee he chairs, and Supervisor Gloria Molina and the Los Angeles Grand Avenue Authority she chairs, was the makeup of their team, their vision for re-imagining Grand Avenue, and the process for carrying out their plans. They also had to agree to pony up \$50 million in advance payment for land-use fees. That money will pay for building the park, freeing the city and the county from the need to appropriate funds for it.

This odd financing mechanism explains how the creation of a Los Angeles public park got shoehorned into a commercial development, and why I decided, uninvited, to cast a wider net. This wasn’t an official competition. No one was paid to do the work. There’s no winner. Yet, more than 300 people sent stuff to the USC Annenberg School for Communication’s Norman Lear Cen-

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ter, where I serve as director.

Why? Who cares what this new park will look like? Who cares who gets to decide that and to design it?

The answer goes beyond the neighbors, workers and visitors who will see it and use it. The future of this park offers Los Angeles a signal opportunity to declare — to itself and to the world — what the right balance is between private and public, between commercial and civic, between a civic project that is created from the top down (that is by politicians and powerful developers) and one that grows from the bottom up and is inspired and nurtured by a passionate public.

If we believe that our city is the emblem of 21st century urbanity, then the way we imagine our new frontyard is a statement about what we think city life can and should be. New York’s Central Park, Washington’s Mall and the great boulevards and parks in many other cities, here and abroad, are not only places to stroll and have fun; they’re messages to the world — messages about identity, creativity and ambition.

A sampling of some of the most provocative, imaginative, off-the-wall, bold and beautiful elements of the proposals we received appear in these pages. You can find many more at www.grandintervention.org.

None of this is to say that the official developer isn’t taking a very professional approach to the park.

The company has in its corner consultants with park design experience (Philadelphia-based Laurie Olin), com-

mercial park programming experience (Dan Biederman of New York's Bryant Park), downtown Los Angeles experience (Brenda Levin, who worked with the late Ira Yellin on the Bradbury Building and Grand Central Market), as well as starchitect Frank Gehry.

In 2004, Related and the Grand Avenue Committee held open forums to solicit principles and ideas about the overall development. In 2005, additional outreach meetings enabled citizens to comment on the preliminary master plan. It's too early to know if those meetings will turn out to have been pro forma gestures intended to manage a public relations challenge, or whether there really will be extensive, substantive and consequential civic engagement about the park — including what to do with the additional 10 acres that would become available if authorities, as many expect, decide to tear down the earthquake-damaged Stanley Mosk Courthouse and the county Hall of Administration adjacent to the park's present footprint.

But it is unlikely that Related will voluntarily open up the design process to what most of the dozens of world-class landscape designers, architects, urban planners and visionaries who participated in the Grand Intervention recommend: a real professional competition.

For the developer, the Grand Avenue Committee and the Grand Avenue Authority, the attraction of a closed, in-house process is control. A design competition could unleash political forces that a company or an elected official would rather contain. A competition fueled by imaginations run wild could dramatically raise expectations. The ideas about park use and park design that emerge could be too controversial or unconventional — “too L.A.”

Participants might propose spending too much money on design, and not enough on engineering; they might offer beautiful opportunities to bask in nature, but slight some beautiful opportunities to bring in revenue

from branding and programming.

On the other hand, some of the most dazzling recent park designs, such as the High Line in New York and Downsview in Toronto, have sprung from competitions. There are plenty of ways to run competitions, from invited to open, from local to international. There are ways to write rules that set boundaries on budget, engineering and use. There are ways to build the committees that write competition rules and that choose the winners so that a wide variety of community stakeholders are represented. In Orange County, the process for designing the new Great Park has been a model of balancing competition and civic input with real-world practicality and accountability. There's no reason Los Angeles can't do that just as well.

The riot of ideas this Grand Intervention has already unleashed suggests to me that our city is eager to engage in every aspect of park design and programming — not just during polite, contained and essentially powerless encounters with the developer, but also in the back rooms and the corner offices where decisions get made.

I know, I know: Design isn't democracy. Planning isn't a popularity contest. Creativity doesn't come from consensus. But what's wrong with a little competition?

Hey, Eli Broad, do you want good or great?

Gloria Molina, do you want nice or knock-your-socks-off?

And you, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Councilwoman Jan Perry, do you want Los Angeles to settle or to soar? I know why a developer might like order. But if Los Angeles' civic leaders are afraid of the kind of creativity that comes from messiness, well, maybe it's been too long since they made mud pies in a sandbox.

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