Playing with parks
By Neal Gabler

All urban parks are a dialogue between nature and man, the fortuitous and the planned, the contemplative and the active, the spiritual and the temporal, the moment and history. It is a dialogue that has been going on for more than 100 years, and though its results vary, our urban parks have usually wound up at one pole or the other, subject to one theory or another, so that the dialogue usually turns out to be a monologue.

What I propose for the Grand Avenue Project’s 16-acre public space is that two fundamental ideas of park design be merged to create an area that is both a pastoral wilderness and a theme park. In effect, it would be a park in constant dialogue with itself.

At one end of the conceptual spectrum is the 19th century idea of the park as a retreat from the city that surrounds it. This was the guiding principle of Frederick Law Olmsted, whose Central Park in New York provided the model for urban parks well into the 20th century. As Olmsted saw it, Central Park posed a "class of opposite conditions" to that of the city. If the city promoted activity, the park advanced leisure. If the city pushed concrete and asphalt, the park promoted grass and trees. If the city represented urban materialism, the park represented rustic spirituality.

Olmsted wanted Central Park to be a raw wilderness, but he recognized the impracticality of turning 843 acres over entirely to nature. Instead, he settled on a compromise of the untamed and the controlled — a partly manufactured wilderness with grassy fields, small forests, man-made lakes and manicured pathways. This prompted some critics to complain
about the park's artificiality. A park may be for man, they griped, but it should not be by man.

Artificiality marks what urban historian Galen Cranz called the park as "recreation facility," the other end of the conceptional spectrum.

In this view, the park was an active space continuous with the surrounding city, where one could play ball, fly a kite, dance or listen to a symphony. Here one didn't want to maintain the idea of nature but the idea of use. The park as recreation facility was a means to an end, while the park as pastoral oasis was an end in itself.

One may not think of Disneyland in Anaheim as an urban park. But if Central Park was the apotheosis of the pastoral park, Disneyland is, in many respects, the apotheosis of the recreation facility, with one fillip: Walt Disney redefined recreation not as something one did but as something one experienced.

Like Olmsted, Disney viewed his park as a world separate from its surroundings — a place that existed either in the past or the future but never in the present. And he erected a berm around it to seal out the real world. Yet like the recreationists, Disney believed in the primacy of use over nature. He conceived of the park as a kind of giant movie set on which visitors could be protagonists enjoying vicarious adventures on various attractions. Disney created a separate imaginative space that borrowed heavily from movie archetypes. For instance, the Jungle Cruise is modeled after "The African Queen." Every passenger can be Humphrey Bogart or Katharine Hepburn.

So how does one take Olmsted's pastoral ideal and meld it with Disney's recreational one for the Grand Avenue park?

Most of the park, and certainly its perimeter, would be a small-scale version of Olmsted's wilderness, with as little human intervention as practically possible. Nature would prevail here. There would be trees and wildflowers and paths snaking through them. This space would provide a clean break from the city.

But within this wilderness would be several "pockets," small open spaces reflective of our contemporary idealization of the park experience. These pockets would be permanent movie sets — designed as movie sets, lighted as movie sets, perhaps even accompanied by a piped-in movie soundtrack. Like Disneyland's attractions, they would be purposely and purposefully artificial and archetypal. For example, at the center of the park could be the Platonic fountain of our mind's eye. At another spot, perhaps, a small town square. At another, a lamplight and bench a la the dance scene in the park from Frank Capra's "You Can't Take It With You." At another spot, a scene from "Panic in Needle Park." At still another, a quaint ice-skating rink from any number of films, complete with artificial snow. There is really no limit to the possibilities.

Visitors to these stylized Hollywood-movie versions of the American park might think of them as a series of stages on which to exercise their imaginations, dip into their memories or share a collective memory.

All these pockets would be interactive. People could climb on the fountain or sit on the benches or skate on the rink — and on these stages, the real visitors at the perimeter of
the park or in its wilderness areas might become role-playing visitors, thus changing their relationship to the park and their consciousness of it.

For Los Angeles, the world capital of entertainment, this concept clearly has special relevance. L.A. purveys illusion. So would elements of this park. L.A. embraces artifice. So would elements of the park. L.A. trades in archetypes. So would elements of the park. L.A. extols performance. So would elements of the park.

In short, the park would be a monument to the power of the motion-picture image and to the elasticity of the American identity.

But it would also address the larger, fundamental issues of what is the definition of an urban park and serve as a living disquisition upon it. This would be a park in which the dialogue between wilderness and artifice, between the pastoral conception of the park and the recreational one, between the 19th century and the 21st century, between nature and mind would never end. They would instead exist in constant contrast to one another and in constant debate with one another.

My proposed park would not be one thing or the other, neither Central Park nor Disneyland, but something new — a park in which experience translates into ideas, a park in which the contemplative visitor is given something to contemplate. That is something worth considering: an idea for a park and a real park all in one.