The mission of the Lear Center is to explore the impact of entertainment on society, for good & ill. By entertainment, we mean not only what Wall Street means: movies, TV, radio, music, video games, toys, sports, gambling. And not just pop culture, but high culture – opera, ballet, art museums – and other domains that have been appropriated by entertainment: news, politics, religion, education, fashion, retailing. Anything that grabs and holds our attention.

We've been around since 2000, at the Annenberg School for Communication at USC. We're named after Norman Lear because of his generosity.

Our work is organized in a dozen projects; we hold conferences, sponsor events, do research, testify, create web sites, provide tools, publish books and papers and engage in advocacy.

Topics we've covered range from the effect of IP law on creativity to the impact of entertainment on television news, and the impact of that on democracy.
The project I’m going to talk about tonight: Grand Intervention.

So what was the origin of the Grand Intervention? Three things converged:

1) Our ambition to study the impact of entertainment on place-making: destination architecture, starchitecture, the Bilbao effect, cultural tourism, the importance to urban planning of play and narrative and the “wow” factor.

2) The announcement that there would be a 16-acre civic park as part of the Grand Avenue redevelopment plan, from City Hall up to the Music Center. Perfect occasion to ask: What might a 21st century park – a place of play – look like, and how might it be used? What does it mean for a designed space to be at the intersection of public space and personal leisure?

3) The announcement a year ago that the Grand Avenue Committee, chaired by Eli Broad, had awarded the Related Cos. – a private developer – the contract not only for the commercial/residential development, but also for the park. A $50 million advance of their lease payments to the County for the land would go for design and construction.
I was struck by some of the reactions to this process for park-making:

DJ Waldie’s LAT op-ed: “I don’t know … if it’s a good idea to have one man’s vision be the pivot on which a project of this importance will turn … More democracy and less willfulness in the planning process would be better.”

Christopher Hawthorne in LAT: These “public-private partnerships … require elected officials to cede substantial control of traditionally civic initiatives to developers.” He also noted the park is currently walled off from the rest of the development by the Mosk Courthouse and Hall of Administration. If they could be demolished, he wrote, the park could be a stunning space.

LAT editorial: “This grungy tabula rasa could become anything … Skeptics do worry about the project’s likely middle-of-the-road architects and lack of well-defined street activity.” The point was made that downtown must offer an experience unlike any suburban mall. That park space – a modern day commons which the city direly needs – is crucial.

I wondered:

How could we at the Lear Center nudge the imagining and designing of the park from middle-of-the-road to insanely great?

What could we do to encourage “more democracy and less willfulness” in the park planning process?

Could we develop and deploy new tools of civic engagement – including technological tools – that might be relevant to other urban design & planning efforts elsewhere?

So I wrote an opinion piece in the LATimes that ran last July:
The developer is doing outreach, yes, but 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…

Here’s calling for a raucous competition for the design of our city’s front lawn. At a minimum, it would give the developer 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?

If the Grand Avenue powers-that-be don’t want to open up at least the park design to a dazzling competition and a robust debate, I say it’s time for a loving civic intervention.”

I asked the LAT to partner in this effort, and they agreed:

“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.”
We got to work.

We set up grandintervention.org as a resource-rich online site for civic engagement.
We created an advisory group of architects, landscape architects, urbanists, academics planners, preservationists, and local activists.

Grand Intervention Advisors

- Jonathan Aronson
- Joan Abrahamson
- Tridib Banerjee
- Manuel Castells
- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- Dana Cuff
- Kevin Daly
- Michael Dear
- Laura Friedman
- Robert S. Harris
- Adam Clayton Powell III
- Mark Rios
- James Rojas
- Roger Sherman
- Michael Speaks
- Doug Suisman
- Richard Weinstein
- Jennifer Wolch
We put online a really rich set of materials for thinking about this park.
For example, we compiled the only collection of articles about the development. We link to over 70 articles that are free on the Web …
Like this one from *LAWeekly*, as well as a bibliography of materials that are only available via subscription services such as Lexis-Nexis.
We also cherry-picked articles and reports, books and Web sites about the history of Bunker Hill and downtown LA …
... like this one from Los Angeles: Past, Present & Future. In order to put the Grand Avenue Park effort in context, we gathered information about parks around America ...
like this page of links about Chicago's Millennium Park, whose 24.5 acres is almost the same size as the Grand Avenue civic park would be without the Courthouse and Hall of Administration.
And we collected resources for thinking broadly about park design and urban development ... like this report from the Trust for Public Land, which says that two-thirds of children under 18 in LA have no public park within walking distance.
To help people understand what this grungy tabula rasa is like now, we put up a ton of photos of the future park site. Here are just three: this is the parking lot across from City Hall.
This is the Court of Flags.
This is the Civic Mall.
To make sure people knew what the official Grand Avenue Committee had in mind for the site, we linked to them as well.
I was graciously contacted by Doug Gardner, who was then the project manager for the Related Companies’ work here, who asked: Isn’t there a danger in raising the public’s expectations about what the park could be? After all, we only have $50 million, and the site itself has constraints.

Good point. If you drill down on the links in our site, you’ll find the baseline promises that the Grand Avenue Committee and Related have made about what we’ll be getting for our $50 million:

• “The most dramatic public space in all of Los Angeles.”

• “A world-class destination.”

• “A grand 16-acre park that will itself become an urban destination for Angelenos.”

• “The new ‘Central Park’ of Los Angeles.”
Here’s what the Committee said will go on at the park:

• “The park will be programmed, maintained and secured by a park manager.”

• “A place to host major cultural events, entertainment programs, citywide celebrations as well as daily events.”

• “A place for families and community celebrations, for everyday recreational amenities, family picnics or a quiet respite.”
Here’s their model of what it will look like:
Here’s their sketch:
Here’s their description:

“On the west end across from the Music Center, the park will be programmed with cultural, arts and entertainment events.

The existing garage ramps will be relocated to allow a grand terrace to connect Grand Avenue to a new great lawn.

The center of the park will feature a colorful garden area with both open and intimate spaces.

The east end will be designed to host civic celebrations and multi-cultural festivals and complete the entrance to the front of City Hall.”

Sounds like pretty grand expectations to me.
We spread word of our competition as far and wide as we could, contacting bloggers and developing an email list of interested people.
LA Cowboy

Wednesday, January 11, 2006

Supervisors Considering Removal Of Hall Of Administration And Courthouse For Grand Avenue Park!

The removal of both the Hall of Administration and the Courthouse needs to happen if the civic center is to be developed to its full potential.


Troy Anderson, Staff Writer/LA Daily News

Los Angeles County supervisors took the second step Tuesday to repair or relocate the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration building by approving a $200,000 contract to study the space needs among seven proposals.

Although the original plan indicated the preferred site for a new county hall would be a parking lot slated for construction as part of the $1.8 billion Grand Avenue project, Chief Administrative Officer David Janssen instead asked for more study.

The proposal is part of the renewed interest in establishing Grand Avenue as a world-class focal point for the city. The project calls for redeveloping 25 acres around the Walt Disney Concert Hall featuring high-rises, shops, restaurants, a hotel, condos and a large park between the county Music Center and City Hall. Officials are considering demolishing the county hall and nearby courthouse to provide even more space for the park.
Grand Ave Park Destroying Paved Lots
Tuesday, March 21, 2006, by jwilliams

It’s never easy balancing greenery with necessity. Or in this case, balancing the new 16-acre Grand Avenue park with the need for parking near City Hall. Really, where are all the bureaucrats going to park once their precious parking spots are razed to make way for lush green spaces in the name of “public good”?
We published periodic reminders and thought pieces about the park and sneak previews of submissions in the LAT and on their Web site.

Rethinking Grand Avenue

Last month in Current, Marty Kaplan of USC’s Norman Lear Center proposed a “Grand Intervention,” asking L.A.’s top urban dreamers and ordinary readers to come up with ideas, drawings and designs for the Grand Avenue Project’s proposed 16-acre public space stretching from City Hall to Bunker Hill. They’re rolling in (see right). Check out the collective brainstorming and find out how to contribute at latimes.com/current, which links to the Lear Center’s Grand Intervention website.
Playing with parks

What if you could mix Disneyland and Central Park and put it in downtown L.A.?

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 pro-
We went to the Grand Avenue Festival in October and asked families and flaneurs to draw and construct models.
We also went to elementary schools, high schools and college classes around the region to encourage submissions, and to ask studio instructors to use the park in their courses.
We asked architects, landscape architects and urbanists around the country about what kind of processes led to great parks, and about what other parks should inspire us, and we turned their comments into web pages. Here’s just a few:

James Corner, Founder & Director
Field Operations

Millennium Park
Eric Owen Moss, Director
SCI-Arc

Parc Guell, Barcelona
Mia Lehrer, Founding Principal
Mia Lehrer+Associates

Echo Park, Los Angeles
Stefanos Polyzoides, Founder
Moule & Polyzoides Architects & Urbanists

Piazza Navona, Rome
Galen Cranz, Professor of Architecture
UC Berkeley

Xochimilco, Mexico City
All told we got about 300 proposals.
We had an informal exhibit of them at the Lear Center.
On Christmas, we published a selection of them in the LAT, along with three articles of commentary.

We published many on our Web site. Here’s a gallery of some favorites:
Terraced fountains produce a billowing river of water from the DWP down to City Hall.
La Alameda would draw on a rich landscape tradition in the Spanish-speaking world, creating a pedestrian promenade in the heart of Los Angeles. Multiple programming elements, from community gardens, jogging and bike paths, to public performance areas, are designed to draw every sort of citizen to the park.
Imagine a physical connection between the civic heart of the city and its original life source: the L.A. River. This park extends green links and small pocket parks from Grand Avenue all the way down to the river.
Imagine recapturing California's agricultural history by surrounding fruit trees with mirrored walls. The trees are 5-in-1 grafted trees with plums, peaches, apricots, nectarines and pluots, all ripening at different times of the season. Visitors are encouraged to pick and share the fruit.
This park has a monolithic light sculpture dedicated to the impact of global warming, a free speech electronic bulletin board, and at night it uses downtown buildings as canvases for immersive urban projections: Picture seeing a waterfall flowing over Disney Concert Hall or a rainforest projected on nearby skyscrapers.
Curved glass planes surround a raised, 6-foot diameter pool which spills water continuously over its black granite edge to give us a quiet, acoustic oasis in the middle of the city.
This is a place of ritual and anonymous celebrities, as an antidote to the usual Hollywood spectacle. Totems made of colored glass project video images of passersby on the plaza floor.
Webport
by Michael Jantzen

Park visitors can Web-surf inside the Web-Port, a temple to both the Internet and the interconnectedness of park users.
A series of bold terraced landscapes. The Sky Terrace spans Grand Avenue, connecting the Music Center Plaza with the park. The Peoples Terrace offers a flat zone for programming between Grand and Hill, while the Meadow Terrace morphs into the roof of an amphitheatre across the street from City Hall.
Stria Park

by “The Unrelated Company”: Robert Apodaca, Dave Chong, Jeremy Fletcher, Mike Jacobs, Jeremy Limsenben, Jimmy Miyoshi & Aaron Neubert

This park divides its spaces into two regions: Above ground are areas for sports, gardens, rock climbing, skating, and a dog run. Below ground are parking, shops, a nightclub, amphitheatre and hotel.
LAp Dancer
by Robert Mothershed

Only in L.A. . . . a park designed to complement the phallic City Hall, complete with sexscreen, lover’s lawn, skim pool and milky cafe.
Serena is 8, and she's in third grade at Harrison Elementary School. Her park has a duck pond, a pool, a basketball court, gardens, monkey bars and a trampoline.
Elba lives on Skid Row and an organization called Inner-City Arts worked with her, in its S.A.Y. Yes kids program. Besides a forest and a bridge over a goldfish-filled stream, she wants a kids-only apartment building in the park.
Travis also lives on Skid Row and is a S.A.Y. Yes kid. He designed a park with space for track and field, a go-cart track, a pool, a Denny's, a Sizzler, a skate park, a bridge with sharks – and a jail.
This park is packed with an urban orchard, forest and meadow, as well as a fountain for play, a reflecting pool, a formal garden, a sculpture garden, restaurants, retail and viewing platforms on Grand Avenue for looking at the whole thing.
Still Motion Park
by Courtney Hukel, Lisa Pidgen & Kee-Hyun Nam
from a Cal Poly Pomona studio class taught by Sarah Lorenzen in the Department of Architecture

This design seeks to promote security by filling the park with vendors and activities. A series of interconnected paths is specifically designed for people-watching, and political activism is encouraged by a giant screen serving as a video open-mike – a soapbox for the 21st century.
The continuous flow of water activates the park, unifies it as a landscape, and draws people through the site. A new civic plaza faces City Hall.
In April, the Frank Gehry-Craig Webb design for the commercial/retail portion of Grand Avenue Phase 1 was unveiled.
How might this affect thinking about the park?

Earlier this year, we got a grant from the Annenberg Center for Communication and worked with the Integrated Media Systems Center (IMSC) at USC’s Viterbi School of Engineering to create a virtual flyover of the park site. When the Gehry plans became available, we asked two Woodbury students, Jason King and Sam Farhang, to help us incorporate them into our flyover. Here’s a screen-capture from their animation.
Related officially announced the core park team: Mark Rios, Brenda Levin and Aaron Paley.

Mark Rios
In the spirit of community building and galvanizing the arts in Los Angeles, Community Arts Resources / CARS creates an outstanding array of focal events and festivals in the cultural and community calendar - events that Angelenos eagerly look forward to year after year.

Through arts and culture, CARS events provide common ground in a city as diverse as Los Angeles. Top-quality music, and dance, storytelling, interactive workshops for children and adults, fabulous food representing the spectrum of world flavors, strolling musicians, stiltswalkers, community groups, and diverse crowds - this is just some of the programming that we do for museums, city agencies, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and others.

CARS events, characterized by a sense of spectacle and play, leave audiences feeling they have experienced something special, something different - unlike any other happenings in the Southern California area.
Because we had a head’s up on who Related’s core team of consultants would be, we’d already had all them in to see the exhibit at the Norman Lear Center.

I’m happy to say that when they recently announced their process, even though they said there was to be no design competition, they said they’d build on our work and hold public meetings, including at least one design workshop.
Their first public meeting is June 21 at the Court of Flags.
Going forward, here are some of our dreams for this process, and others elsewhere.

Infobox, Berlin

One of our inspirations is the Infobox, a temporary, multimedia installation in Potsdamerplatz, in Berlin. The Infobox, which looked like a high-tech trailer on stilts, drew millions of tourists to its displays of the history of the Plaza and the future of the newly designed square. Imagine this in the Court of Flags right now, or in front of Disney Hall.
Ydreams Virtual Sightseeing Tool looks a lot like sightseeing binoculars, but produces what are called geo-referenced augmented views of a real space. The park visitor could use it to see what the park will look like in the future . . . not just what it looks like now.
There are lo-tech options as well. In Charlottesville, Virginia, Mayor Maurice Cox had tremendous success with the installation of a 7x70 foot Community Chalkboard, where citizens weighed in on the re-vamping of Charlottesville’s downtown area. These are actually images of a second Community Chalkboard that’s just been unveiled there, at the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression.
WiFi

WiFi.Bedouin is a WiFi hotspot in a backpack, which enables the creation of a networked community based on physical proximity. It forms a WiFi "island Internet" that is literally mobile. Why not make the future park site WiFi right now?
Sophisticated polling software is already available that allows participants to see how specific demographic groups are responding in real time, while carrying on chats about the questions and results. The Grand Avenue Committee could use a tool like this to evaluate outreach efforts and to quickly refine designs in response to public input.
Residents of Queens, New York, are using Second Life, the virtual world, to hash out ideas for a 7-acre park just south of La Guardia airport. A model of the park built in Second Life will serve as a design resource.
The Free Speech Bulletin in Union Square in NY is a digital bulletin board that can pose questions to the public and record their responses and conversations through pens, SMS text messaging and MMS Multimedia Messaging.
A final thought: Democracy doesn’t guarantee good design. Public input isn’t necessarily a friend to genius. But it’s hard to imagine a Grand Avenue Civic Park that ends up being Civic, or even Grand, unless it taps the imagination and the energy of the community it wants to come play there.