

Making it Real

Redesigning Grand Avenue in L.A.

ARCHITECTS, PLANNERS, AND CIVIC LEADERS have long imagined Los Angeles' Grand Avenue as the reclaimed, reactivated center of a city infamous for its lack of center. Once the primary boulevard of a bustling urban core, Grand Avenue has suffered from the one-two punch of urban renewal and suburban flight.

Now a \$1 billion-plus development deal led by New York-based Related Companies, along with a \$300 million commitment from the City of Los Angeles, could transform Grand Avenue. And the actors are thinking big: a new central park will extend west from City Hall and intersect Grand Avenue, major streetscape improvements will be made, including sidewalk expansion along the Avenue, and several new signature works of architecture will complement the already-completed icons Disney Hall, Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, and Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA). Hotels, shops, restaurants, and housing are also in the works.

The Grand Avenue Committee, a publicly-appointed group overseeing the redevelopment, projects that upon completion 15 million people will visit the Avenue annually—strolling along its wide expanses, taking in a concert at the Disney Hall, attending an exhibition at MOCA, or relaxing in the new central park.

Dreams of a Center

The project sounds like a familiar urban narrative: an American city long suffering the ills of auto-centric development and disinvestment seeks to revitalize its ailing heart. This reading, however, assumes that Los Angeles, a city composed of multiple commercial corridors and a network of smaller centers, should have a single center downtown—and that within Los Angeles' vast downtown the small sliver along Grand Avenue should be that center. Instead, Los Angeles has historically challenged the notion that a metropolis needs a dominant

urban center, and it may take more than one big planning and development project to change that.

Grand Avenue has two sections: a low-lying area of non-descript corporate office towers, and the upper portion atop Bunker Hill where development is proposed. Ever since Bunker Hill's dense network of residential streets were razed after World War II, planners have debated what to place on top of the hill. Culture? Government? Business? A bit of each has been tried, with less than stellar results: buildings with designs that ignore the street, sterile corporate plazas, a few architectural monuments to high culture, vacant lots and parking garages, and almost no pedestrian linkages to the surrounding districts just a few blocks down the hill. The current Grand Avenue Project is L.A.'s newest attempt to stitch this smattering of buildings and planning experiments together into some semblance of a spectacular whole.

The Next American City pages 16/17



THIS PAGE: *The Broadway District of downtown L.A. Photo by John Kamp.* OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: *Ever-present construction in the downtown area. Photo by David Gest.* OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT: *Grand Avenue, with the new Frank Gehry-designed Disney Concert Hall to the right. Photo by John Kamp.*



The design and topographical challenges are formidable, and the track record is poor. But according to Deborah Murphy, native Angeleno, urban designer, and founder of the pedestrian advocacy organization Los Angeles Walks, the developers can succeed if they do their homework and develop a truly contextual design. “Most people don’t get Los Angeles. When a developer from Chicago or New York or China or Japan comes here, they only know the clichés of L.A. They don’t get out there and live it and experience it and walk it and talk to real people,” Murphy said.

Los Angeles’ existing urban centers tend to follow one of two archetypes: the bustling urban district, typically running along a linear corridor, and the enclosed, controlled-environment lifestyle centers. Grand Avenue has the potential to fuse these two urban models into something new, vibrant, and distinctly L.A.

The Bustle of Broadway

Next to Bunker Hill lies the Broadway District, whose effervescent (and sometimes overwhelming) atmosphere could not serve as a starker contrast. Broadway is remarkably well-preserved, including twelve historic movie houses, and boasts wide sidewalks, a dense grid of streets, and bustling throngs of people, most of whom are Latino. The Los Angeles Conservancy, L.A.’s non-profit historic preservation organization, recently launched an initiative to restore the movie houses, attract new businesses, and help extend the street’s activity into the evening.

Broadway aficionados are quick to point out that its current vibrancy didn’t develop overnight. “Broadway is a multi-textured, multi-cul-

tural space, which you can’t engineer. Its character has come from layers of time. It wouldn’t be the same place if it didn’t have this sort of visceral appeal to it, the smells and the sights—which aren’t all pretty and aren’t all nice, but there’s a beauty there,” said Trudi Sandmeier, the Conservancy’s Broadway Initiative Coordinator.

And then there are the buses, which bring crowds through Broadway from outlying areas.

“Broadway is successful because of all the bus stops. All the shops cater to people who take the bus. You don’t go there to buy a TV set, you go there to buy small tchotchkes,” said James Rojas, who serves as transportation planning manager for the L.A. Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Rojas is founder of the advocacy organization Latino Urban Forum. He lives downtown and has written and spoken extensively on Latino cultural responses to physical space in Los Angeles.

Rojas points out that patterns of movement in the Broadway District are wholly different from the museums and cultural centers along Grand Avenue. People come to Broadway because it is part of their everyday trajectory through the city, not a special trip to an unlikely destination. In order to be successful, the City and those involved in the Grand Avenue Project must ask themselves how Grand Avenue, like Broadway, could become part of residents’ everyday urban existence, rather than a drive-in/drive-out destination. Grand Avenue does have transit—two subway stations, part of the recently developed four-line rail system. But these stops are heavily underutilized, as the middle class that the subway was largely designed to serve has yet to embrace public transit in L.A.

Some, like Doug Suisman, one of the Grand Avenue Project’s principal urban designers, say that absent a significant transit ridership, Grand Avenue and the surrounding streets need a residential constituency. “The key question is, ‘Is anyone waking up on Grand Avenue in the morning?’ And I don’t mean in a sleeping bag on the sidewalk. I think housing is the key, and that’s the most encouraging part [of the project]: that instead of just building more government bureaucracies, which are closed on nights and weekends, or concert halls, which are largely empty during the day, housing and hotels particularly put people there at all those infill hours—late at night, early in the morning, throughout the day,” Suisman said.

Indeed, recent nearby history has shown that a residential presence makes or breaks an urban design project. West Hollywood has poured millions of dollars into improvements along its pulsing heart, Santa Monica Boulevard. But the designers’ principal aim wasn’t to give rise to lively urbanity; they simply enhanced an environment already used by many West Hollywood residents. John Chase, urban designer for the City of West Hollywood, says of the Santa Monica Boulevard project, “A lot of times, people expect streetscape or façade improvements to completely change the character of the street, and it won’t do that unless there are the engines for use: transportation, parking resources, adjacent living spaces.”

Editing Out Urban Unpleasantries

Los Angeles could do the same, focusing on its own districts with active, diverse constituencies:

the Hollywood District along Hollywood Boulevard, Melrose Avenue between Fairfax and La Brea, the Broadway District, the downtown Jewelry District, or even stretches of Beverly or Sunset Boulevards. For some time, the City of Los Angeles has foregone significantly enhancing such districts. Instead, they focused on the kind of simulated, semi-urban environments that people only visit for a brief spectacle—including so-called “lifestyle centers” like The Grove, Hollywood and Highland, The Bridge, and hilltop complexes like the Getty and California Plaza.

These places are not malls in the traditional American sense of the word. Lifestyle centers are malls without roofs, containing fabricated urban streets, nostalgic architectural styles, cultural attractions, and in the case of The Grove, fake public transit.

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Professor and Chair of the U.C.L.A. Department of Urban Planning, has extensively studied the evolution of American public space. She emphasizes that L.A.’s propensity to develop such enclosed destinations has much to do with market demands and cultural perceptions of crime and safety. Places like California Plaza and The Grove are controlled environments that discourage certain kinds of undesirable activity. The spaces are inward-oriented, to keep shoppers in and stragglers out.

John Chase suggests that the market for this new kind of mall has increased not simply because of fear and nostalgia, but because of American cultural values about urban space in general. “Americans are nurtured to separate their uses, to want a lot of space around them, to want the pleasures of the city without the consequences,” Chase said.

Many Americans don’t want the smells and grittiness Trudi Sandmeier pointed to as an aesthetic quality of Broadway. Even she is well aware that many prefer the kind of sanitized urban environment a private developer can provide—and that the planners involved with Grand Avenue have to respond to these demands. “[They] are trying to create a place where people who live in a non-urban environment can come and feel comfortable being

urban,” she said. “It will be a completely safe, pleasant place to be.”

Drawing People Beyond Grand Avenue

Her hope, though, is that Grand Avenue will not only draw people to Bunker Hill, but will encourage them to venture out and explore uncharted territory, such as Broadway or the burgeoning gallery scene on Spring Street. Whether that wish is fulfilled depends largely on the design of the Related Companies project. The design could encourage its new patrons to simply stay put on Grand, or it could create the linkages necessary to encourage pedestrians to wander down the hill towards Broadway, the Jewelry District, and beyond.

So far the choice seems to be something in between. The initial design envisions a promenade-style path along Grand Avenue to the new City Park, and down to City Hall. The circuitous and somewhat unpleasant route down to Broadway and beyond, however, is not really addressed.

“Right now, you can’t walk from Spring Street to Grand Avenue. On paper, that is a ten- or fifteen-minute walk; in reality, nobody does it,” said Vinit Mukhija, assistant professor of planning at U.C.L.A.

People don’t walk the route Mukhija describes partly because it just isn’t interesting enough to hold their attention. According to Doug Suisman, “distance and impediments to walking are in some measures psychological. If it’s an interesting walk, you’ll go up the hill. The walk up Bunker Hill is kind of bleak in every respect. Not only do you have the climb, but the experience is pretty deadly from almost every direction.”

Ultimately, Related Companies is not solely responsible for these pedestrian linkages. After all, one private developer can only accomplish so much with one project. The linkage issues Suisman and Mukhija allude to have developed over years and years of essentially suburban development in the heart of downtown. They present an urban design challenge that will take years to resolve.

What the People Want

To native Angelenos like Deborah Murphy, it is up to the City of L.A. and its planning department to address these urban design questions more actively. She feels that the City has paid more attention to architecture than to the spaces between the buildings. “The tail wags the dog here,” she laments. “The politics are so reactive in L.A. that when a developer approaches us, we simply say, ‘Oh, we’re so happy, do whatever you want!’ If cities in general did a better job of providing leadership and setting the agenda for change, we would get it.”

To address debate and involve Angelenos in the design process, the Grand Avenue Committee has been organizing public meetings that seem like old-fashioned town hall gatherings. With a \$1 billion investment, however, Related will have much of the ultimate say in what Grand Avenue looks like. So what will Angelenos get?

At a minimum, they can expect spectacle, says Suisman. “Unless we make it fantastic, no one will come. It speaks to the fundamental question of trying to make Grand Avenue a central downtown destination. The freeways have only reinforced its isolated corner position. And therefore you can only overcome it with spectacle, destination, and allure, and a ton of money and effort.” ●

Grand Avenue Committee
www.grandavenuecommittee.org

L.A. Conservancy
www.laconservancy.org

Banerjee, Tridib and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris. *Urban Design Downtown: Poetics and Politics of Form*. San Francisco: William Stout, 1998.

Chase, John. *Glitter Stucco and Dumpster Diving: Reflections on Building Production in the Vernacular City*. New York and London: Verso, 2004.

Fulton, William. *The Reluctant Metropolis*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Levey, Noam N. and Louise Roug. “New York Developer Chosen to Make Grand Ave. Grand.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 2004, p. 1a.



Getting around downtown, Broadway District.
 Photo by David Gest.