

# Los Angeles Times

California/Local



Rios Clementi Hale Studios

The space between downtown's Music Center and City Hall has long been envisioned as a connector between government and cultural institutions.

## Civic Center park takes shape in L.A.

**A 16-acre plot east of Grand Avenue will contain gardens, lawns and performance spaces.**

By Cara Mia DiMassa  
March 12, 2009

For generations, leaders have vowed to unify the landmark institutions in Los Angeles' Civic Center area into a vibrant public space. Grand plans have been floated since the 1920s -- only to die for a lack of money or interest.

On Thursday, officials will unveil what many consider L.A.'s best shot for a bold civic space -- a 16-acre park that would flow east from the cultural institutions atop Bunker Hill, around a cluster of government buildings and ending dramatically at the steps of City Hall.



The design, created by Rios Clementi Hale Studios, calls for four zones -- an event lawn for rallies and concerts, a community terrace featuring a multicultural garden, a performance space with a stage, and a plaza whose centerpiece would be the historic Arthur J. Will Memorial Fountain.

The proposed L.A. park also would physically reunite the Civic Center with Bunker Hill, 50 years after a huge redevelopment project leveled the old neighborhood and replaced it with skyscrapers.

The space between City Hall and the Music Center, now a jumble of concrete plazas and parking lots, has long been envisioned as a connector between government and cultural institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

Officials looked for inspiration in other recent city park projects such as Millennium Park in Chicago, the new Jamison Square and Tanner Springs parks in downtown Portland, Ore., and the renovation of Bryant Park in New York. Those parks have created gathering places in the heart of urban neighborhoods that are magnets for residents and visitors alike.

"It would truly be a pedestrian-oriented oasis in all of our cement, steel and all that we have downtown," said L.A. County Supervisor Gloria Molina, who says the park will have a more open feel than other L.A. urban parks, such as Pershing Square, whose designs were aimed at discouraging crime and the homeless.

The design actually breaks the rectangular space into several mini-parks and -- perhaps more important in the current financial climate -- already has most of its \$56-million budget in the bank.

"With the money at hand, this is what we can build," said architect Mark Rios.

Although the \$3-billion Frank Gehry-designed Grand Avenue complex has stalled because of the faltering credit markets, officials say they have the money to push forward with the park plan.

The park would be paid for with \$50 million in developer fees and interest from Related Cos., developer of the Grand Avenue project. That money is secured for the park even if Grand Avenue is never built.

The design is less ambitious than some community leaders wanted -- and lacks some of the avant-garde touches that urban planners had suggested. But those features would have required raising additional money.

Besides the four zones, the design also divides the 16 acres into sun (to the north) and shade (to the south). Rios said plantings in the sun area would be mostly California natives in a warm color palette of oranges, yellows and rusts; the shade area would have plants in cooler colors such as blue and green.

Because the park would be situated on a steep hill, with two major thoroughfares -- Broadway and Hill

Street -- cutting through it, Rios said, designers tried to take advantage of those features as much as possible.

Rios said the active zone around the fountain would provide "lots of visibility" from Grand Avenue and other vistas, and would act as a magnet to draw people into the park. The Will fountain, a centerpiece of the current Civic Center mall, would be renovated and re-purposed in the new design, near Grand Avenue. New, energy-efficient pumps would be programmable, and the water pools below the fountain would be expanded.

An artist's rendering of the design shows children frolicking in the lower pools, and designers envision people stopping to rest along a planter at its upper edge.

Below the fountain plaza, the performance area is being designed to accommodate small concerts or other special events. A children's garden would be nearby.

To the east of Hill Street, park visitors will be able to meander across a garden designed to represent the city's diverse communities and cultures through a wide variety of plants.

From there, gentle sloping steps would descend toward Broadway. Across the street, a grassy event lawn is planned for the block on Spring Street in front of City Hall now occupied by a parking lot.

Rios said the area could be a gathering spot for concerts, rallies or farmers markets.

The west end of the park would offer dramatic vistas down Bunker Hill to City Hall, and the east side of the park would look up at the Music Center, Disney Hall and the towers of Bunker Hill.

The plan resembles in some ways a grand vision for the Civic Center proposed in the 1920s by the Allied Architects Assn., which called for a broad paseo between City Hall and Bunker Hill.

Brady Westwater, a downtown activist who has tracked the park's development and seen the new design, called it a huge improvement over the previous version, shown last April to the downtown community. That plan was criticized as too austere, even prosaic, and lacking adequate green space.

"It follows the tradition of the developer listening to the community every step of the way," he said.

Still, almost everyone involved in the process of designing the park admits that the current design is limited by its budget. Officials say they hope to add more to the park design, including restaurants, a carousel and an outdoor pavilion, as they secure money from private sources. In the future, officials have talked about razing several older Civic Center buildings and adding 10 acres to the park.

The schematic design for the civic park must be approved by the county Board of Supervisors, the

Community Redevelopment Agency and the joint-powers authority overseeing the Grand Avenue project on behalf of the city and county. Votes on the park plan are expected to be scheduled for later this month and early April.

Officials have said that they hope to break ground on the park's base plan as early as mid-2010. Construction of the entire 16-acre space would take two years, but there is hope that the event lawn would open after the first year of construction.

Molina said the park would provide green space to downtown's burgeoning residential population and also become a gathering for citywide events. She said she hopes that this park will learn lessons from downtown's other big open space, Pershing Square, which for decades has bedeviled officials trying to lure more users to it.

"I don't want it to become another cement, steel Pershing Square," she said.

[cara.dimassa@latimes.com](mailto:cara.dimassa@latimes.com)