

# The New York Times

Sunday, January 28, 2007

## Corner of Art and Commerce in Los Angeles

By NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF

HOW to find meaning in a centerless world? For a half-century, that has been the question facing the strip of corporate towers, cultural landmarks and undeveloped lots known as Grand Avenue in downtown Los Angeles. Time and again the avenue has been the focus of grandiose proposals by civic leaders who dreamed of transforming it into a cultural Acropolis. Angelenos watched the progress from the comfort of their suburban enclaves, mostly with bland indifference.

hill and the vibrant Latino district to the east; between traditional East Coast planning formulas and this city's informal urban landscape; between its high-culture aspirations and its pop-culture ethos. How Mr. Gehry negotiates all this could determine whether downtown Los Angeles will ever matter to anyone but civic boosters and curiosity seekers.

The downtown area's decline dates from the late 1920s, when the birth of the Miracle Mile on

Center at one end and a cluster of ominous-looking towers clad in dark glass and slickly polished masonry at the other.

In architectural terms the avenue said as much about the city's cultural insecurities as its growing ambitions. The Music Center's barren concrete plinth and fusion of classical and modern décor are an unoriginal takeoff on New York's Lincoln Center; the generic corporate towers mirror those found in every American city, sleek corporate citadels devoid of imagination. Yet the architecture also masked an insidious social agenda: like other cities seeking to make themselves palatable to squeamish suburbanites and tourists, planners walled off the new cultural and business district from the rest of downtown.

Its elevated plazas, under the constant surveillance of security cameras and private guards, formed a virtual cliff that towered over the Latino underclass shopping in dilapidated Beaux-Arts buildings and theaters a few blocks to the east. The isolation became more glaring as the city's growing density and booming Latino culture began to suggest a different reality.

That history began to turn with Disney Hall, which unlike its neighbors is woven into its immediate surroundings. Its sweeping steel facade, which unfurls like a ribbon along the avenue, echoes the curved facade of the Chandler Pavilion next door, its forms lifting up to allow the life inside the lobby to spill out onto the avenue. Grand stairs climb to a verdant public garden that wraps like a necklace around the rear of the building.

When Related hired Mr. Gehry in 2005 to design its entertainment and retail complex too, it seemed like a promising step. Few architects are as familiar with the avenue's history or have played a bigger role in shaping the city's architectural legacy. And although the project did not seem nearly as glamorous as Disney Hall, it was viewed as critical to the avenue's success. Situated on the east slope of Bunker Hill alongside the Colburn School of Music and the Museum of Contemporary Art, it presents one of the last opportunities to repair the fractured link between the new cultural district and the old city center.

Yet in some ways the project represents a return to the predictable approach long favored by large-scale urban developers across the country. Related has now decided that the Mandarin Oriental Hotel will occupy the lower half of the south tower. (Bill Witte, president of Related's

*continued on page 2*



A view of Frank Gehry's plan for a retail, residential and entertainment complex on a parcel of land in Los Angeles, across Grand Avenue from the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, foreground, and Walt Disney Concert Hall, right.  
Photo credit: Gehry Partners

That all began to change with Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall, completed in 2003, which raised the level of architectural ambition for Grand Avenue. Next month the Los Angeles City Council and the county Board of Supervisors will review revised plans for a retail, residential hotel and entertainment complex that may reveal just how willing the city is to address the deep social rifts beneath the area's newly polished surface.

Designed by Mr. Gehry for the New York-based Related Companies, the master plan for the site, a choice parcel directly across from Disney Hall, provides a case study for one of the most pressing issues in architecture today. Can the bottom-line world of mainstream development produce something of architectural value at enormous scale? Or is Mr. Gehry simply there to provide a veneer of cultural pretension?

The project also offers a lens on the conflicts that continue to define the identity of downtown Los Angeles today: the tension between the fortified cultural and business district at the top of the

Wilshire Boulevard heralded the triumph of a new motorized culture. For decades since, promoters of downtown Los Angeles have struggled to stem the exodus of businesses to the palm-lined streets of Old Town Pasadena, Westwood and Beverly Hills. Meanwhile cultural critics like Reyner Banham skewered the very concept of a traditional downtown core in a city best grasped through the windshield of a car.

The redevelopment of Grand Avenue has been the most significant effort so far to reverse that trend. It also ranks among the most misguided.

First conceived in the 1950s by downtown power brokers like Buffy Chandler, the wife of Norman Chandler, who was then the publisher of The Los Angeles Times, the avenue was intended as a citadel of office towers and cultural monuments at the top of Bunker Hill. To create it, planners bulldozed a vast neighborhood of Victorian houses, replacing them with a network of freeway ramps, tunnels, underground roadways and elevated streets crowned by a sprawling Music

California division, said the hotel's cachet would help "brand" the residential condos.)

The developers also plan to include more than a half-dozen restaurants, a bookstore, health club and a boutique supermarket, the staples of today's high-end shopping mall. It's the same formula the developer used for the Time Warner Center, the vertical mall that seems so out of place on Columbus Circle.

Meanwhile Mr. Gehry and Related have engaged in a quiet tug of war over how open the development should be to its surroundings. In an early version of the design, the two residential towers were set at the site's northeast and southwest corners, visually framing the complex and anchoring it into the surrounding skyline. A series of two- and three-story retail buildings, loosely stacked upon one another like a child's building blocks, were scattered along Grand Avenue, creating an informal street wall that served as a counterpoint to the flowing stainless-steel forms of Disney Hall.

These forms broke apart to allow street life to flow into the retail complex. Inside, the blocks framed small open-air courtyards overlooked by terraces. A staircase cascaded down from one of the courtyards to the corner of Olive and Second Streets, a gesture intended to open up the complex to the more chaotic street life farther down the hill.

Over the last year, as Mr. Gehry struggled to contain rising construction estimates, his box-like forms became more static, lending the design a more formal symmetry. The proposed facades of the two towers (one 22 stories, the other 45), which originally included fractured planes of glass that gave the impression that they were coming apart at the seams, are also less dynamic, forming a polite backdrop to Disney Hall across the avenue.

Mr. Gehry added a large terrace above Olive Street so that visitors strolling down from Grand Avenue would pass under an elevated walkway to

a sweeping view of the downtown skyline to the east. But in a major reversal, the developers forced Mr. Gehry to remove the cascading staircase that was the project's main link to the life at the bottom of the hill, a bustle that spreads from Olive Street to Broadway's Latino shopping district and beyond, to Little Tokyo.

Mr. Gehry has tried to compensate for this by anchoring the corner with a restaurant and packing more stores into Olive Street. He has also decorated his boxlike buildings with swirling canopies to pump life back into the restaurants and shops above. But the towering block-long facade that faces Olive Street is an eerie echo of the clifflike 1980s-era corporate plazas just to the south. And he still faces the challenge of overcoming the social apartheid of downtown Los Angeles: high culture separated from low, upper-middle-class concertgoers from working-class Latino shoppers.

The pressure to compromise puts Mr. Gehry in an awkward position. As a relatively unknown architect in the mid-1980s he captured the public imagination with a series of projects that drew on the bleaker, oft-maligned corners of the American metropolis: mini-malls, chain-link fences, corrugated metal sheds, cheap stud-wall construction in the suburbs. Projects like his 1978 house in Santa Monica, a stunning blend of tilting angles and mundane materials, and the Edgemar outdoor shopping mall there, with its signature elevator tower wrapped in chain link, were conceived as a salvo against the superficial glamour of places like Beverly Hills.

By making room for outsiders and misfits, as well as the weary working-class suburbanites and Hollywood Boulevard drifters who were the flip side of the American dream, Mr. Gehry emerged as a populist hero.

In subsequent years, as he began working for cultural institutions that are open to architectural experimentation, he ventured into ever more flam-



An earlier plan with a staircase that has been eliminated. Photo credit: Gehry Partners

boyant territory and became a global name. Now that he has returned to working with mainstream developers, Mr. Gehry says, he has far more leverage than he did 20 years ago.

But the Grand Avenue development may ultimately say more about the limits of any architect's power than about Mr. Gehry's elevated status. Scanning a collection of study models for the plan at his office recently, I asked whether he might draw on his early history — the cheap materials and crude populist aesthetic that could be used to break down the avenue's sense of exclusivity — for inspiration here.

In other words, why not pick up the thread he discarded years ago rather than try to create glamour on the cheap?

Mr. Gehry paused for a minute. "My question has always been how well the developer could adapt themselves to this mixed ethnic neighborhood," he said. "It's uniquely L.A. and it's very powerful, and the push-pull is about how do you do that. Hopefully it'll happen over time."

If not, he may have to stick to clients whose values better match his own.