

A “Central Park” for Los Angeles?

A major urban park is an essential component of downtown Los Angeles’s long-overdue renaissance.

VIRTUALLY EVERY GREAT U.S. city has a major and much-loved urban park: among cities, New York has Central Park; Chicago has the Lake Michigan waterfront linear park and the recently completed Millennium Park; and San Francisco has Golden Gate Park. These parks not only provide welcome open space in the heart of crowded big cities, but

over 4,000 acres (1,619 ha), does not meet the needs of an urban park. It is primarily difficult-to-use hillsides and mountains and is hard for most Angelenos to reach—requiring a car. Its facilities are so limited that visitors often are turned away on busy summer weekends. Maguire Gardens behind L.A.’s main library is not the answer, either. Although it

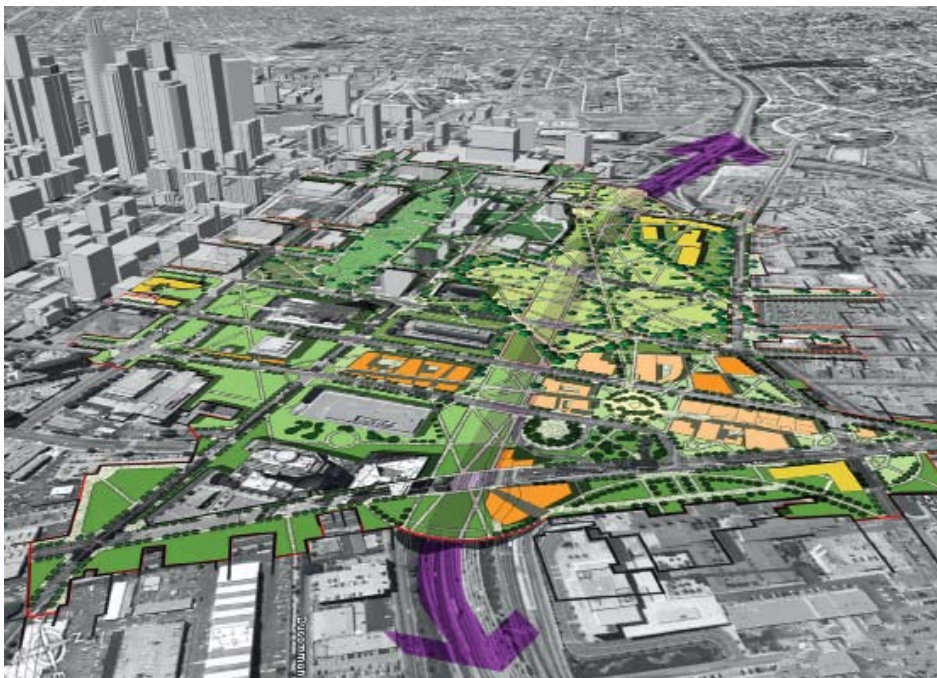
Boston and 90 percent in New York.

A major urban park is an essential component of downtown Los Angeles’s long-overdue renaissance. In the short-lived and self-fulfilling “building boom” that Los Angeles did have, little or no attention was given to developing a lasting and improved public realm. No U.S. downtown has become a thriving city center without attractive and easily accessible public open space for its residents. Moreover, a truly urban public park in Los Angeles, with the stature of Central Park, would also serve the densely populated neighborhoods near downtown—Chinatown, Little Tokyo, and the urban core—all of which lack adequate open space. Residents of these neighborhoods could easily reach a downtown park on foot or by subway, trolley, bike, or bus.

However, downtown Los Angeles is mostly streets and buildings with no readily available setting for an urban park comparable to Central Park. But, is that really true? More than 100 acres (40 ha) of potential downtown urban parkland are hiding in plain sight, a location seen by hundreds of thousands of people every day. It is even close to all the new transit lines that converge downtown. The park’s construction would not require relocation of any Angelenos or large-scale building demolition. In addition, the money to construct this park is available now from a variety of sources, both public and private.

Where is this potential downtown urban park located? Most of it is on top of the 101 “Big Trench”—the unsightly quarter-mile-long stretch of the 101 Freeway, just east of the 110 interchange, that slices through the historic heart of Los Angeles.

A new urban park for Los Angeles could be placed on a “lid” built over the 101 Freeway and could serve the densely populated neighborhoods near downtown—Chinatown, Little Tokyo, and the urban core—all of which lack adequate open space.



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also they are magnets for the key ingredients that make a successful downtown: housing and hotels, shops and cafés, museums and concert halls, public festivals and events, and recreation ranging from active sports to relaxed strolling.

Los Angeles, however, is a city with no park to match the scale or calibre of New York’s Central Park. One of its parks, Griffith Park, with

is the only appealing open space in downtown Los Angeles, at 1.5 acres (0.6 ha), it is tiny.

Los Angeles has less parkland per resident than any other large U.S. city, and many of its parks and much of its open space areas are located in isolated, mountainous terrain. Only 30 percent of residents in Los Angeles live within a quarter-mile of a park, compared with 80 percent in

The Big Trench separates some of the city's most prized and appealing landmarks—Olvera Street, Chinatown, and Union Station—from the rest of downtown, creating isolated pockets of activity rather than a livable, walkable, and unified downtown district.

It would involve building a lid *on top of* the Big Trench and its exit ramps, incorporating nearby parking lots and underused land next to the freeway, and reconfiguring the county and City Hall area—converting an urban eyesore into a 100-acre (40-ha) urban park and walkable, vibrant urban neighborhood. At the same time, the core of the historic downtown that had been split by the freeway could be reunited by the new “Park 101,” as it has been dubbed by the local community.

To redevelop the Big Trench into Park 101, the recently reinvented Grand Avenue would be anchored

by the Disney Hall at one end and a great new green space—not a vehicular no-man's-land—at the other end. Angelenos could walk from Union Station through the park to their jobs at Civic Center or to weekend events on Bunker Hill, rather than dodge traffic across intimidating bridges above the roar of the freeway. Students at the new \$200 million Performing Arts High School, which will be built with limited playing fields next to the freeway, would have outdoor recreation space second to none (the park itself) immediately adjacent. Chinatown would have a new “address” and a great “front door” opening onto downtown along Cesar Chavez Boulevard.

With this new urban park, many of downtown L.A.'s future buildings, like the planned high school and the recently completed cathedral, could embrace the open space.

The long-proposed Plaza de Cultura y Artes could become one of the park's great destinations, like the Metropolitan Museum on one edge of New York's Central Park and the Smithsonian Institution on Washington, D.C.'s National Mall.

Just as New York's Central Park has done, Los Angeles's new urban park would attract billions in downtown real estate investment that would generate housing, commercial space, cultural venues, jobs, and increased tax revenues for years to come. When the city of Chicago created 24.5-acre (9.9-ha) Millennium Park *on top of* a downtown rail yard and underground parking garage several years ago, it kicked off a condominium construction and renovation boom in the surrounding blocks. Millennium Park's tree-lined promenades, gardens, playing fields, fountains, cafés, and free concerts are a magnet for Chi-

cagoans and visitors from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., seven days a week.

Skeptics, of course, will say that creating a park on top of the Big Trench is impossible. Yet, a park requiring no relocation or demolition would benefit significantly all the major downtown players. L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who frequently speaks about the need for more urban parks, would get an urban park at the footsteps of City Hall. Companies that are investing billions of dollars in downtown Los Angeles would gain a downtown park that could greatly boost property values. Developers of housing in new and renovated downtown buildings would have a major amenity to lure tenants and homebuyers. Angelenos—the most important constituency of all—would get a major new park within an easy walk, or bus, trolley, or auto ride.

In addition, such an urban park could embrace and further the goals of L.A.'s recently created Urban Design Department to focus on creating great urban boulevards and streets throughout Los Angeles, such as the completion of Grand Avenue and the revitalization of Caesar Chavez and Alameda boulevards.

Decking over the Big Trench and constructing a park on the lid would be a relatively straightforward engineering feat. Other cities have built parks on top of freeways. In Manhattan, for instance, 15-acre (six-ha) Carl Schurz Park and Gracie Mansion (the mayor's official residence) have sat atop the East River Drive expressway for 50 years. Seattle opened its five-acre (one-ha) Freeway Park atop I-5 in 1976, and it is currently exploring options to replace the elevated Alaskan Viaduct in downtown with public gardens and waterfront promenades.

Hollywood, California, also is well along in its planning and feasibility study of a freeway "lid" to create an outstanding 36-acre (16-ha) neighborhood park.

For years, major cities have transformed the most unlikely locations into great public spaces. Several of Paris's grand tree-lined boulevards replaced medieval walls and slums. Portions of Chicago's Lake Michigan parkland were once reeking garbage dumps. Downtown San Francisco's several-mile-long Embarcadero promenade and the five-acre (two-ha) plaza in front of the landmark Ferry Building replaced the much-loathed double-decker Embarcadero Freeway that cut off San Francisco from its waterfront. Land is also a commodity in major urban centers; land costs could be prohibitive in trying to acquire and assemble a site for a large urban park.

Where would L.A. get the money for a downtown urban park? The

financial component is always a challenge, but various funding sources are available for such a project. The proposed state of California infrastructure improvements, which are meant to update and expand, as well as "green" the freeway system to reduce congestion and pollution, could provide considerable funding. Caltrans could simplify the outdated access and exit ramps in this stretch of the 101 Freeway and add another lane in each direction before it decked over the Big Trench.

To raise additional money, owners of properties near Union Station and Grand Avenue, who would stand to benefit from such a park, could contribute to a fund for the open space as part of their development agreements, developers could be required to set aside land, donate conservation easements, or pay fees for park improvements. Mitigation obligations at

the Port of Los Angeles currently are funding significant enhancements of the public realm for Los Angeles's new waterfront and other roadway improvements; similar funds could also help pay for the urban park. Finally, fees from California's proposed Green Freight Initiative, which will create more efficient and less polluting freight shipment on highways and by rail, could provide additional funds.

Imagine New York City without Central Park. In reverse, envision what downtown Los Angeles could become if the Big Trench dead zone were converted into a lively urban park. **U**