

developer of this project, Rick Caruso, is best known for transforming the historic Los Angeles “Farmer’s Market” into “The Grove,” an outdoor mall linked by a neohistoric trolley to a 1930s-era market of stalls selling fresh and prepared foods and tourist trinkets. When The Grove attracted more than three million people a year, Caruso was courted by many cities eager to realize similar success for their communities. In Glendale, Caruso promised to deliver an “American” town square defined by cinemas, restaurants, and stores with housing above, all wrapped around a new “green” complete with a band shell. For this open-air downtown mall, Caruso also negotiated a seventy-seven-million-dollar subsidy with the local redevelopment agency.

While several affected property owners and others questioned the Americana deal as well as the findings of blight required to promulgate it, public opposition to the project was cemented when the owners of the Glendale Galleria, a competing mall located across the street from the new project, financed the conceptualization of an alternative design. This substitute design, perhaps disingenuously given its commercial advocates, included less retail and less development intensity. A public spat between the two developers ensued. The competing real estate interests each sought public approval, and eventually, sensing that the city council would support the Caruso project, the Galleria owners financed a citywide referendum: an up or down vote on the Americana. Expert designers, consensus planners, or even informed decision makers were not going to determine the future use of downtown Glendale. After an intense campaign lasting several months and costing several million dollars, Caruso won with 51 percent of the vote: the Americana at Brand was approved in an exercise of direct democracy.

Santa Monica Hedges

In Southern California even the smallest design details are now subject to the propositions and will of the voters. In Santa Monica, a city of one hundred thousand people just west of Los Angeles, a little-known and unenforced ordinance restricted the height of front-yard hedges for decades. Reflecting a late-nineteenth-century ideal of townscape, the objective of the ordinance was to maintain the open sensibility of what was once a sleepy and somewhat seedy seaside resort. Today Santa Monica is a redoubt of wealthy home owners who seek to shut themselves out from their urbanized surrounds.