Vacant Lottery: “a term coined to describe a philosophy of urban consolidation, an approach to urban development in opposition to the currently pervasive, uni-centered, high-density/high-rise North American city with its sprawling suburban periphery. This alternative, that advocates conserving and building on the existing urban fabric, can be illustrated by projects ranging from small urban interventions, such as a single family house, to large city planning proposals....The overall intent is to demonstrate the importance of architectural context, particularly in the city, and to propose an attitude that might return to our cities the architectural coherence and urbanity they once had, effecting a reconciliation of good design and social commitment.”

—Barton Myers
Barton Myers is an avowed urbanist—a self-described radical in his early advocacy of old-fashioned qualities like density, mixed-use, and contextual planning in the late 1960s when that fundamentally conservative position was considered counterculture. Myers's urban manifesto was codified in “Vacant Lottery,” the title of the Design Quarterly issue co-edited by Myers and Canadian architect and educator George Baird in 1978. The term lived on long past the journal’s circulation cycle as both an urban infill strategy and an acknowledgment of the ceding of city planning responsibility to the “lottery” of private developers’ proposals. What is fascinating about Vacant Lottery is that it defined themes that can be consistently traced through Myers’s urban planning work from the 1960s on. These themes were manifested in projects of such a wide range of scales, programs, and clients that one must understand the fundamental impulses of each project in order to understand their commonalities.

Myers's guidelines for a new kind of urban redevelopment now sound like widely accepted truths—the motherhood and apple pie of planning—to a contemporary generation schooled in the principles of new urbanism. They were, however, revolutionary when first articulated in the 1970s:

1. Alternatives to high-rise only: low-rise infill development strategies
2. Alternatives to buildings as isolated objects: connected, additive buildings
3. Alternatives to the bulldozer: preservation and reuse of existing buildings
4. Alternatives to the erasing of historical traces: combinations of old and new buildings
5. Alternatives to residual useless “open spaces”: creation of urban spaces—streets, squares, galleria streets, courtyards
6. Alternatives to universal “international style” modern architecture: reinterpretation of regional building elements and materials
7. Alternatives to singular, specialized housing types: development of a range of medium-density urban housing prototypes
8. Alternatives to the “tower-in-the-park” or “tower-in-a-plaza”: development of tower bases that have a positive, formative relationship to streets, squares, and blocks
9. Alternatives to introversion of retail frontage: retail shops address and support public space
10. Alternatives to single-use zoning districts: mixed-use districts and neighborhoods

To assess the significance of Vacant Lottery, it must be understand as a strategy that was borne of a tumultuous era in urban development that most North American cities, including Toronto where Myers was practicing at the time, were experiencing in the 1960s and ’70s. As both the product and the representation of a coalescence of reformist impulses, a review of the forces—political and social for Toronto, biographical and architectural for Myers—that informed Vacant Lottery provides a lens onto a critical juncture in the history of North American metropolitan development as well as Myers’s urban work.

When Myers moved to Toronto in 1968, the city was in turmoil over the form of redevelopment that had been taking place. As described by architects Bruce Kuwabara and Barry Sampson in a 1975 City Magazine article, high-rise apartment developers, “with their techniques for blockbusting neighborhoods and their off-the-shelf plans for tall buildings of small, expensive apartments mounted an assault on older working class neighborhoods in many Canadian cities in the 1960s.” In Toronto, however, a serendipitous confluence of forces and people at that time produced a different response from other cities’ acceptance of the self-destructive, post-World War II paradigm: the population rebelled against the forces transforming its urban center and ousted an old guard of traditional interests in favor of a reform-minded mayor and city council; Jane Jacobs, author of The Death and Life of Great American Cities and vocal advocate for a mixed-use, neighborhood- and historic preservation-centric approach to cities, had moved to Toronto and was taking on development forces there; and architects like Barton Myers and his partner, A. J. Diamond, engaged proactively in the reform movement and proposed alternative planning strategies to the uni-centered, high-rise city.

Diamond and Myers, as described in the City Magazine article, came to be publicly identified with the general reform movement in city politics. Their case studies and design proposals for low-rise, high and medium-density ‘prototypes’ as alternatives to high-rise development, their public criticism of
York Square, Toronto
Ontario: elevation and section, ca. 1969
A. J. Diamond and Barton Myers
Kuwabara and Sampson noted that more than any other Canadian architectural firm, Diamond and Myers’s work “combines a commitment to serious design with a commitment to social action. They have had impact in Toronto and elsewhere both through their design work and through their role as activists taking public positions on urban issues.” Profoundly affected by what he saw happening to his home town, Norfolk, Virginia, Myers was motivated by his concern that Toronto too would become a city with an uninhabited downtown populated only by commercial towers.

Myers had moved to Toronto from Philadelphia, where he was schooled in the kind of urbanism he has advocated since. His studies at the University of Pennsylvania were formative—there Dean G. Holmes Perkins had implemented a modern curriculum that integrated architecture, landscape, planning, and fine arts. Myers also learned lessons about design in congruence with the natural environment and existing urban fabric from planners such as Ian MacHarg and Edmund Bacon. He recalls the city’s demonstration of a “more thoughtful urbanity” that included urban consolidation, reuse of existing structures, respect for the existing fabric, reconciliation of the design of old and new structures, neighborhood preservation, and the development of infill housing rather than bulldozing downtowns and building sprawling suburbs. Also instilled in Myers at this time was the architect’s responsibility to the
public realm. Among his formative experiences in Philadelphia was employment with architectural master Louis Kahn, who taught him about a modernism rooted in history rather than destruction of the past.

After moving to Toronto, Myers became deeply engaged on both local and national levels in advocating a new model for urban redevelopment, based in the precepts articulated in Vacant Lottery. Studying plans for cities around North America, he observed that all promoted the same kind of single-use commercial core, surrounded by sprawling peripheral rings of residential suburbs, which decimated the social and architectural fabric of cities. Since in his view modern city plans didn’t consider physical and social consequences, Myers made “Doomsday Drawings” that demonstrated what cities would be like if built out as their official plans prescribed. He wrote articles and gave lectures around America warning of the impacts of contemporary urban planning: loss of diversity in employment opportunities, building types, housing forms, and social mix; costly and inefficient suburban sprawl that required the destruction of facilities in the city in order to replicate them much less efficiently in the suburbs; takeover of open space and agricultural land; dependence on the car and extension of expensive freeways to move people in and out of the downtown core, inflicting traumatic impacts on inner city neighborhoods in their way.7

Objecting to this urban pattern of “extreme inefficiency and wastefulness,” Myers proposed consolidation as a more practical method of accommodating urban growth and a better use of existing resources: “Infilling has many virtues: it tends to spread out the population, creating a
multi-centered city; it rebuilds and thus maintains the health of existing neighborhoods; it allows for and even develops neighborhoods which contain a variety of people and places." Treating Toronto as a testing ground for this new approach to urban redevelopment, Myers, in partnership with Diamond, challenged developers' assertions that high-rise towers were the only way to achieve high densities and their rightful profits. They "mounted an effective counter-attack," Kuwabara and Sampson noted, "by designing low-rise ‘infill’ alternatives which conserve existing buildings instead of demolishing them, respect existing street patterns, and succeed in providing housing for more people on less land."

Myers's early projects such as York Square, designed with A. J. Diamond, and Dundas-Sherbourne provided models for a new kind of urbanism whose impact resonated far beyond their local communities. The York Square project, completed in 1969, was Toronto's first intentional infill development and one that was pivotal in the rehabilitation of the community of Yorkville Village. Myers views it as "a prototypical model (in spirit) for the rebuilding of Toronto and other cities, a demonstration of how cities can grow without totally destroying the existing fabric."

The project comprised transformation of a half-block site of decaying commercial buildings into an economically viable commercial center. Diamond and Myers's strategy, described by one architectural critic as "urban evolution over urban revolution," maintained the scale of the individual buildings and renewed and unified them into a single commercial complex by overlaying a new facade of one-story shop fronts and a scheme of automobile and city scaled supergraphics. Openings in the new porous screen of shop fronts
Dundas-Sherbourne Infill Housing: aerial view of site showing new infill around old buildings, 1976
provided entry into a courtyard formed by a new U-shaped infill building housing restaurants and cafés. Jane Jacobs told *Progressive Architecture* that she was “highly gratified” by the York Square project:

> It is a Pygmalion operation. Inevitably, in a healthy, developing city buildings built for one purpose are transformed for other uses. Diamond and Myers have sensitively used the old buildings without trying to pretend they are something else: they have made them not in the least bit quaintsy, but of our times. To see the possibilities in what to most people would have appeared the most humdrum materials is one of the great contributions that architects can make ....The uniqueness and promise of York Square, though it cannot and should not be copied in carbon, should be an example to all developers.¹⁴

Myers’s Dundas-Sherbourne housing project, completed in 1976, was the first infill housing scheme in Toronto¹⁵ and the first project undertaken by the City of Toronto’s Non-Profit Housing Corporation. Its genesis was a developer’s proposal for two apartment towers on a half-block site of nineteenth-century houses in an inner-city residential neighborhood. Residents urged the city to study other forms of housing that would be more compatible with their community. The mayor and city council, elected on an anti-typical development reformist platform, authorized Diamond and Myers to examine schemes that demonstrated the feasibility of a high-density, low-rise alternative to the tower option for rental housing in the city’s inner core. Taking advantage of the site’s deep lots and the mid-block lane right-of-way, the proposal comprised renovation of the existing houses into apartments and a carefully calibrated insertion of a new five-to-seven-story complex, invisible from the street, behind the houses. Based on the demonstrated feasibility of accommodating 376 units on the constrained site, the city purchased the land from the developer and built a project that realized in a radically new way the social and planning objectives of the city, the community, and the architects. It did not include high-rise buildings; it took advantage of opportunities created by the city’s traditional grid of streets and lanes; it provided physical compatibility with the neighborhood by retaining existing houses and streetscapes; the community participated in the design process and residents would have a continuing say in management of the housing; costs were kept affordable for moderate-income residents; accommodations were provided for a mix of families, senior citizens, singles, and roomers. One journalist commented that the project violated almost every clause in metropolitan Toronto’s planning act and was “a revelation of options in housing previously never conceived of in North America.”¹⁶ Architectural critic Suzanne Stephens noted in *Progressive Architecture* that the scheme is most important “for what it adds to the understanding of sense of place, while optimistically pointing to the possibilities of merging housing and ‘architecture.””¹⁷

> A third urban project—a proposal for the development of an eleven acre site in downtown Los Angeles—represents the Myers Vacant Lottery principles transposed to an exponentially larger vacant lot created by what Myers has called “one of the largest urban lobotomies in the history of urban redevelopment”¹⁸—the wholesale demolition of the Bunker Hill neighborhood. In 1980 the city’s redevelopment agency invited developers to submit proposals for “A Grand Avenue” in a five-block area, calling for a dense mix of office space, residential units, retail space, a hotel, and a new museum of modern art. Developer Robert Maguire consulted with UCLA architecture school dean Harvey Perloff on the composition of the team that should develop his Grand Avenue proposal. As Maguire considered the ingredients that characterized successful urban centers—“those which attract people day and night and which provide a setting to encourage a high level of recreational, social, and cultural activities”¹⁹—he realized that he was not looking for one master architect or planning firm: “A city is a reflection of the life within it; a single person cannot possibly create the complexity of a city.”²⁰

In order to ensure the diversity of individual design expression within a unified urban scheme—and to prevent the monolithic and sterile effect of a typical planned development—Maguire assembled a team (known then as the All Stars) of architects, landscape architects, and planners (Lawrence Halprin, Charles Moore, Ricardo Legoretta, Edgardo Contini, Sussman Prejza, Carlos Diniz, Cesar Pelli, Robert Kennard, Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, Frank Gehry) led by Myers and Urban Innovations Group
who headed up the master plan, urban design, and overall coordination work. (Myers also designed the Garden Tower and Olive Terraces housing.) Because there were many on the team, Maguire noted, “we had a large diversity of impressions, perceptions, and experiences to draw upon, to exchange one with another. It is a refreshing approach to urban planning and I believe it is the most appropriate.”

The team first identified the qualities and components that they felt downtown Los Angeles lacked and the project should provide:

1. substantially increasing residential housing downtown, particularly in the moderate price range
2. the creation of an appealing human scale environment correcting the existing rather alien pedestrian environment downtown
3. strengthening the downtown as the cultural hub of Southern California
4. encouraging implementation of effective transportation systems
5. enhancing the environment necessary to attract and maintain major businesses downtown
6. designing a project that would make a unique statement as the capstone of Los Angeles
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Those goals were translated into planning principles that can be recognized as the fundamental precepts of Myers's Vacant Lottery writ large:

1. the making of a great street in L.A. incorporating cultural institutions, offices, housing, and commercial development in a mixed-use project rivalling Vienna, New York, or Paris

2. division of the large site into small blocks—maintain the historical L.A. grid and rights-of-way; fabric vs. island

3. the idea of small courts distributing open space throughout the scheme with public park emphasis being the street—Grand Avenue

4. introduction of arcades and the rejection of an introverted urban scheme

5. emphasis on making a strong base to enhance the pedestrian scale

6. double range of buildings addressing Grand Avenue and Olive Streets [sic]

Myers’s urban design deliberately departed from the modernist model of towers in plazas. Instead, every element was intended to rejuvenate the existing grid of streets and to consolidate this “blown-out” area of downtown Los Angeles. Opening out to face the city and offering a “grand avenue” to rival the world’s best pedestrian boulevards, the project offered an architecturally distinguished and sophisticated urban setting for a rich variety of office, residential, cultural, entertainment, and retail uses. As Myers described it,
The plan transforms Upper Grand Avenue into a stately boulevard with a park promenade extending along its length. Unlike many other projects of its size, ‘A Grand Avenue’ provides park space which is not inwardly focused, but emphatically oriented toward the city. The park contains fountains, an outdoor theater, and a variety of pavilions for restaurants and cafes. Fronting Grand Avenue are the project’s major cultural and commercial structures, unified by a connecting ground-level arcade of shops, restaurants, galleries, and public facilities. The commercial structures include a 470-room hotel and 3.1 million square feet of office space. A wide range of housing adds 900 residences to the downtown. To create a distinct visual identity for the project, while remaining integrated into the existing context, building heights are carefully correlated to each other and to the surrounding structures. The plan recognizes the historic downtown grid, while its scale and texture respond sympathetically to existing and proposed adjacent development.

The diverse complex of individually designed buildings were joined together by a robust network of plazas, arcades, and irregular pedestrian streets that distinguished the project by its human scale and spatial quality at ground level. Architectural critic John Pastier’s commentary in A + U evokes a scheme that exemplified Myers’s urban philosophy:

Rather than discrete buildings isolated in space, Grand Avenue was a hybrid that drew upon Medieval notions of irregularity and human scale, and Renaissance and Baroque attitudes towards public places and processional space, while still accommodating contemporary traditions such as competitive differentiation of individual structures and the unabated urge to build ever higher....The genius of this proposal is that it looks and works like part of a real city, rather than like one more oversimplified ‘project’ of the sort that large-scale redevelopment efforts have imposed on most large American downtowns.26

Pastier decried the other developers’ entries for their disinterest in the street, freestanding towers floating in undifferentiated open space, minimal diversity of use, and hostility to pedestrians.

True to its infill role, Myers’s scheme proposed to bridge the chasm between the two very different halves of downtown Los Angeles that flanked its site: to the east, a shabby but vibrant area of turn-of-the-century office buildings, stores, and movie theaters populated largely by non-white, low-income patrons and, to the west and south, a new downtown characterized by affluence, large institutional buildings in vacant plazas, and empty sidewalks. Pastier noted that the project helped “to bridge the gap between old and new, rich and poor and Angelenos and minorities” and would have provided “a symbol and working prototype for the ongoing redevelopment of the city’s most significant district.”27

One can look at Myers’s entire urban oeuvre, including his campus projects, and find Vacant Lottery imprinted on virtually all proposals. And, when asked about the future of cities, he continues to envision a multi-centered, mixed-use, transit-centered city with a preserved and consolidated urban and social fabric. When asked in 1986 to propose an architectural style for the future (in that case, the future was 2001), Myers outlined precepts that one would recognize as those of Vacant Lottery:

The context is urban. The form is that of the multi-centered city....Densities are more evenly distributed in this style, with greater emphasis on the mid-density ranges...The highrise will be put back on its side! The uses are mixed, and transportation demands are met by efficient public systems which cater to the pedestrian....connection and linkage are principles in sensitive consolidation of urban fabric....Regional and local responses create genuine diversity....Historical traces remain—good old and new building combos are encouraged.28

One can imagine that, if asked the same question in 2016 about an appropriate redevelopment strategy for cities fifteen years hence, Myers would continue to advocate his philosophy of urban consolidation. It is not that his urbanism hasn’t evolved over the past decades as he has tested it on a range of small and city-scale projects; rather, few cities have evolved to meet Myers’s criteria.
A Grand Avenue: perspective view of the final scheme, rendering by Carlos Diniz Associates, Courtesy of the Carlos Diniz Estate.