Architecture and Planning as a Reflection of Character

The New Obama Presidential Center

BY ERIC UHLFELDER

The Central Park Conservancy has just given permission to Donald Trump to build his future presidential library across the southeast corner of Central Park.

Imagine ever reading such words?

In Chicago, they don't have to imagine. The 19.3-acre Obama Presidential Center, which opened in June, was built within the 552-acre historic Jackson Park along Lake Michigan in the south side of Chicago.

Most will see this development as honoring the country's first Black president, whose intelligence, grace, and gifted oration earned him two terms. He steered the country out of the Great Recession, created the Affordable Care Act, made the U.S. part of the Paris climate agreement, coordinated the Iran peace deal, killed Osama bin Laden, and showed Americans — and the world — what is possible through quiet diligence and diplomacy.

The center, a digital repository of the president's papers, honors our country's history alongside Obama's life and work. The project also includes a community center and public library, the reclamation of a six-lane road — about four acres — into newly landscaped paths and parkland that extend seamlessly over the center's smaller structures, and the planting of 900 new native, climate resilient saplings. And the center is entirely powered by renewable energy.

But was this an ideal way to honor the 44th president's legacy?



MUSEUM TOWER. *Credit: The Obama Foundation.*



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Building in a Historic Urban Park?

After considering sites at two universities in Chicago, at Columbia University, and at the University of Hawaii, the selection of Jackson Park was a compelling nexus. The president and his wife grew up in adjacent neighborhoods, where Obama was a community organizer and then became the district's state senator.

But the site was controversial. Jackson Park was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1871 — the same folks who gave us Central Park and Prospect Park — and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Opponents argued the city's decision to give away parkland was illegal. Herb Caplan, founder and president of Protect Our Parks, explained that "there is actually a statute in the Park District code that says public parks property cannot be distributed to a private party for private use without providing substitute property of equal or greater value that will be used for outdoor public park purposes. The city of Chicago bypassed that statute altogether."

One hundred faculty members of the adjacent University of Chicago wrote in opposition to the center's development in Jackson Park. Professor W.J.T. Mitchell, who co-authored the letter, said, "Olmsted had a very consistent vision, which was that the democratic urban park should not have monuments to great men."

The legal fight reached the region's federal circuit court that oddly ruled Caplan's group didn't have standing to litigate the case. Caplan then petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court. But Associate Justice Amy Coney Barrett, without explanation, blocked the case from being heard by the full court.

The city approved the 19-acre plan, receiving near unanimous support of the city council and endorsement by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who was President Obama's first chief of staff. The center paid $10 for a 99-year lease and is exempt from future property taxes.

Why Was So Much Parkland Needed?

The design competition initially called for 115,000 square feet with another 42,000 square feet for parking. The final plan morphed into 450,000-square-foot master plan, driven by the Obamas' desire for far more than a presidential library — a multipurpose community complex open to all.

Unusual components of the building program include an NBA-regulation size basketball court set within a 60,000-square-foot community center, a display of Michelle Obama's dresses, a 291-seat auditorium, a full-scale replication of the Oval Office, and a 437-car parking garage.

The lead project designer, New York-based Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, won the competition, in part due to their broad vision of an integrated campus plan that accommodated the president's increasingly ambitious vision.

With plenty of vacant and underutilized land in the surrounding neighborhood that the center could've revitalized, it's not clear why that option wasn't pursued. Clearly, a free and highly visible historic park setting was preferred.

Williams and Tsien explained they were repeatedly prompted to imagine a grander and more iconic project. They felt starting with this goal inverted the design process that's normally informed from the inside out.

Williams and Tsien also sought "to honor the land." But the development destroyed nearly 800 trees — many were healthy old growth trees that survived decades of Chicago wind and winters with nearly five-foot-wide trunks.

The official environmental assessment determined that this large urban development project would have "no significant impact." Extensive destruction of the park's green canopy, reduced carbon capture, and higher levels of heat generation were not considered material concerns, even with escalating climate change and ever-increasing wildfire smoke perennially blanketing the region.

The National Park Service, which authored the assessment, argued that "these impacts would be minimal in scale compared to the size of the 552-acre Jackson Park Historic Landscape District." This argument feels very much like New York City's decision, made 20 years ago, that permitted the Yankees to tear down two adjacent mature Bronx parks and 1,000 trees to build a new stadium.

A sign the center could've made do with less land: Virtually every space, including the entire Presidential Suite on the penultimate tower floor and the rooftop lounge, is available for weddings, corporate receptions, professional networking events, and cocktail parties.

Tower in the Park?

The center is comprised of many well-crafted architectural and spatial features. But the Museum Tower is by far the most discernable element from near and afar — an urban menhir. The architects original thinking was for a "quiet" organic design that complemented the setting, that "grew from the earth rather than stood on it."

But the Obamas pushed for a beacon, inspiring a lantern-like shape. It soars 225 feet, equivalent to a 20-story building, five times the height of the western glass façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art facing Central Park. Each side has a distinct profile. From an elevated perspective (see photo), the center is an elegant multi-faceted sculpture. But from ground level, it overwhelms the park and adjacent neighborhoods.

In a strange way, the tower echoes the ungainliness of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington; in both instances, designs that don't accurately reflect two remarkable personas. The major difference: President Obama actively shaped the center.

There's a cognitive dissonance going on here: A complex celebrating an honorable leader who improved America and her environment built upon the destruction of nearly 20 acres of historic parkland that had been serving his former lower-income constituents who first elected him to government. At a cost of $850 million, the country's most expensive presidential center visually feels more like a backwards looking monument to Obama rather than a forward expression of hope on which his campaigns and presidency had been founded.

Perhaps the center is a search for permanence, a response to the shredding of so much of President Obama's work by the current occupant of The White House.

Both are unfortunate legacies.