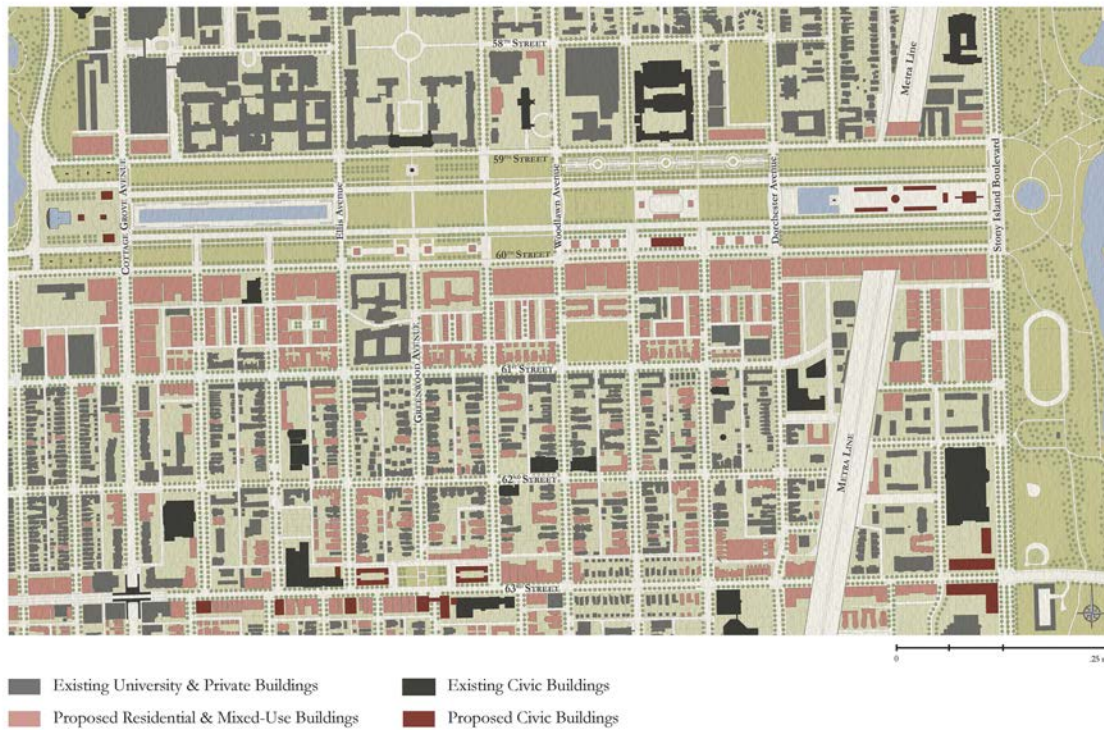


## Imagine The Obama Presidential Center on Chicago's Midway Plaisance<sup>1</sup>



### *Chicago 2109 proposal for the historic Midway Plaisance (north) and Woodlawn Neighborhood (south)*

Chicago has a proud tradition of architectural modernism, but sometimes that tradition conspires with local development practices to get in the way of good place-making, social solidarity, economic justice, and fiscal sustainability. Consider for example Chicago's Midway Plaisance and the controversies currently besetting the proposed Obama Presidential Center (OPC). Then consider how selected local traditions of classical humanist urbanism in tandem with some updated planning ideas could help Chicago resolve these controversies and simultaneously ennoble The Midway, The University of Chicago, the Obama Presidential Center, the adjacent Woodlawn neighborhood, and ultimately Chicago itself.

One mile long and an eighth of a mile wide, The Midway Plaisance connects Jackson Park on the east to Washington Park on the west, flanked to the north by Hyde Park and the University of Chicago, and to the south by the historic Woodlawn neighborhood. An original element of the 1871 plan for The Chicago South Park by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, The Midway featured prominently in the Columbian Exposition of 1893, where it was the site of the world's first Ferris wheel. Today it hosts transportation and active recreation, but remains an unfinished urban asset.

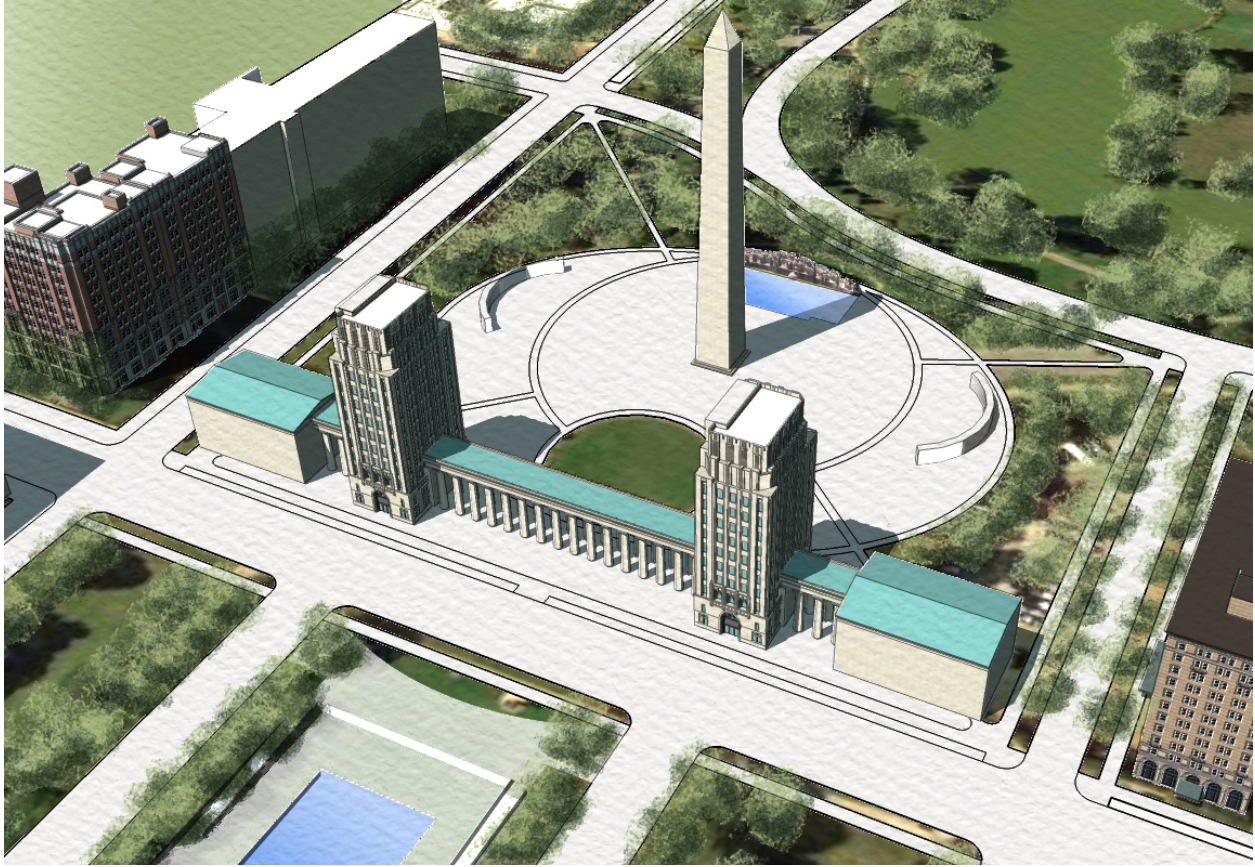
<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this appeared as an opinion piece in the Commentary section of the *Chicago Tribune* on June 18, 2019.

Marie Acalin and Roger Foreman, two Notre Dame graduate urban design students, have recently re-imagined The Midway as a baroque-scale urban boulevard, defined spatially to the north and south by new academic and residential buildings, and terminated at each end by monumental architecture. A grand urbane vision informed by Rome, Paris, Washington DC, and Chicago's own Daniel Burnham, their work engages pressing issues of land use, race and class mistrust, neighborhood gentrification, and equal justice under the law, by proposing traditional Chicago building types, form-based-zoning, incremental development, and land-value-taxation as related elements of a strategy to promote economic revitalization in Woodlawn without neighborhood population displacement. Substantive recommendations include:

- defining The Midway's 60<sup>th</sup> Street edge with new 10-12 story buildings that shelter University programs and 2400 housing units;
- burying the Metra tracks and terminating The Midway's eastern axis with a new Ferris wheel overlooking Jackson Park, and terminating its western axis with a relocated OPC;
- 1800 additional Woodlawn housing units in infill walk-up residential buildings between 61<sup>st</sup> and 63<sup>rd</sup> Streets;
- using land value taxation to stabilize property values and promote new building on vacant lots;



*Chicago 2109 proposal for The Midway Plaisance, looking west*



**Chicago 2109 schematic student proposal for the Obama Presidential Center at the western end of The Midway Plaisance**

- north-south connections from The Midway to new civic and commercial buildings on 63<sup>rd</sup> Street;
- and new pavilions, monuments, and activities in The Midway, related to University and Woodlawn institutions immediately north and south.

The foremost civic opportunity of the Notre Dame plan is the alternative Obama Presidential Center. The current proposal is a symbolically mute monolith-and-playground on a controversial 20-acre site in Jackson Park southeast of The Midway. In contrast, the student proposal is more classical, monumental, and better sited for the historic significance of the Obama presidency: a 250-foot obelisk –the design is schematic, but associations with The Washington Monument on The National Mall are deliberate-- flanked by two twelve-story buildings-*cum*-pylons terminating the west end of The Midway at the southeast corner of Washington Park, and locating the OPC more closely to both Woodlawn and the University. Placing the OPC in this baroque-scale setting would elevate the OPC, The Midway, and Chicago itself by emphasizing more the historical continuities than the historical discontinuities of the Obama presidency, confirming it as a watershed achievement of aspirational American ideals of freedom, justice, and equality. Finally, the relocation of the OPC allows the center complex to engage and enhance two existing monuments at the west end of The Midway (Lorado Taft’s 1920 “Fountain

of Time” and Peter Schaudt’s 2005 “Dr. Allison Davis Garden”), and proposes two new monuments similar to Taft’s to flank the Obama obelisk. One to the north would commemorate Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, the other to the south liken The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Moses leading the Children of Israel out of Egyptian slavery. The entire OPC ensemble would thereby link the Obama presidency simultaneously to both the ideals and the flaws of the American Founding, to the history of African-American emancipation, and to the biblical foundation of the mid-1960s Civil Rights Movement’s opposition to the Jim Crow regime of legal segregation.



*Chicago 2109 proposal for The Midway Plaisance, looking west*

Some Chicagoans, citing historical sins of colonialism and slavery, will object to employing classical humanist architecture and urbanism to honor our nation’s first African-American president, and to knit together Chicago neighborhoods historically divided by race and class. But such objections typically overlook the colonizing role played by modernist architecture in Chicago’s infamous history of crony capitalism and the race and class segregation crony capitalism sustains. At Notre Dame, in addition to her classical humanist architectural and urban aspirations, there remain rumors that the way forward from sin is repentance, penance, and change of life, a contention that surely applies to classical humanist and modernist architects alike. Chicagoans would do well to revisit the *Plan of Chicago*—arguably Chicago’s greatest big idea— and employ our best legal and aesthetic traditions on behalf of both justice and beauty in our shared public realm.