

Why “South Parks”?

Those who have been following Project 120’s ever-expanding proposals will have noted that in September 2015 Project 120’s website suddenly shifted from referring to its plans for Jackson Park to claiming it is “developing plans to revitalize Chicago’s South Parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.” Many have wondered: What was “South Parks”? What exactly did Olmsted design? And most especially, what relevance does the “South Parks” concept have today?

In fact, there once was an historical, single South Park, *but only in concept, never in actuality*. In 1869, the areas now known as Jackson and Washington Parks and the Midway Plaisance were designated as “South Park.” Olmsted and his partner Calvert Vaux were retained by the South Park Commission (one of three such geographically defined park commissions) to develop a plan to turn the large site, then uncultivated and with no more than a dozen small dwellings, into parkland.

Olmsted and Vaux presented their plan in 1871. Focusing on Lake Michigan as the most important feature of a flat, marshy site, they designed an interconnected series of lagoons linking the lake on the east with the prairie of Washington Park on the west via a long canal through the middle of Midway Plaisance.

Five months after their design was submitted, however, the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 rewrote the plans for South Park. While the actual parkland itself was untouched by the fire, all work was suspended for a year, and Olmsted and Vaux’s ambitious vision was scaled back. By the late 1880s, Washington and Jackson Parks had been given their separate names and identities. Most of Washington Park had been improved, and it was a popular destination for city dwellers. Work on Jackson Park had proceeded more slowly -- a promenade along the lakeshore had been developed, but only the northernmost end of the area had been converted into parkland.

When Chicago was selected as the site for what became the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, Olmsted was asked to help select the fair’s location. Stressing the importance of views of Lake Michigan as the fairground’s backdrop and noting the unfinished state of Jackson Park, he suggested this as the site for the World’s Columbian Exposition. Despite the earlier idea of a large, unified “South Park,” he ruled out using Washington Park for parts of the fairground, not wanting a disjointed site. Because of space constraints, the Midway Plaisance was utilized for some popular events.

After the fair, a series of fires destroyed many of the buildings, and most of the other structures were soon razed. In 1895, Olmsted’s firm began transforming the site of the fair back into parkland. Remaining true to Olmsted’s original ideas, the Jackson Park re-design included a system of lagoons, many of which exist today.

Given this history, what is the relevance today of the South Park concept (now adapted as South Parks)? What is Project 120 attempting to achieve by trying to revive it? What does the Chicago Park District have to say about this? What are the views of the community members in the many diverse neighborhoods adjoining the three distinct parks? All good questions. We need to keep asking.