

The Phoenix Pavilion and the Music Court: two entities, two histories

Project 120, on its website and in its presentations, refers to the “Phoenix Pavilion and Music Court” as if these were a single entity rather than two distinct concepts. It describes the proposed new Pavilion’s amenities as including “a new performance venue that incorporates the historic outdoor amphitheater (Music Court) designed by Olmsted” in a way that some might consider misleading. In fact, the two have separate histories, as outlined below.

- ❖ The original Music Court was located on the east side of the (now closed) Clarence Darrow Bridge, adjacent to the current parking lot. At present, elements of the original semi-circular design are still in evidence in the remnants of the diagonal walkways, but otherwise the Court is difficult to discern today.
- ❖ The Music Court was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in 1895 to have a bandstand in its center around which people might gather. The walkways were to be lined by formal rows of trees to provide ample shade for concert-goers. No permanent bandstand or other structure was ever erected though there were temporary platform stages at times.
- ❖ The original Phoenix Pavilion, located on Wooded Island, has a separate history based in the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. In designing the site for the exposition, Olmsted hoped to keep Wooded Island free of buildings, wanting to retain it as a quiet, natural area. However, exhibitors continued to petition to build there, and Olmsted concluded that the least disruptive plan was a temple and floral display proposed by the Japanese government. Accordingly, in March 1893 the original Phoenix Pavilion, known as the Ho-o-den, was dedicated.
- ❖ At the end of the Exposition, the Phoenix Pavilion was given to the City of Chicago. Restoration work was done on the structure in the 1930s as part of a variety of WPA projects in the Park. Sadly, the Pavilion was destroyed due to arson in 1946.
- ❖ Starting in 2012, Project 120 developed plans for a radically different Phoenix Pavilion in a new location, on the parking lot east of the Darrow Bridge. Characterized as a visitors’ center, it would have a vastly expanded range of new functions including a café, exhibition space, a music venue, a multi-purpose room for meetings and (fee-based?) events including parties, lectures, and workshops, and of course restrooms (though, in fact, a restroom exists not far away that just happens to be the oldest extant building in the Park). Thai architect Kulapat Tantrasast of the firm WHY was hired to do the conceptual design that appears on the Project 120 website.