

CHICAGO

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Big dream could bring city full circle

Just over a century ago, Chicago was competing with other American cities to host a major international event in a South Side park that would bring the Windy City to the attention of the world.

Here we go again.

Wednesday's shift of a proposed stadium for the 2016 Olympics from the downtown lakefront to Washington Park — a stone's throw from Jackson Park, home of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 — sets up the tantalizing possibility of a historic full circle.

Even those disappointed by the lost prospect of an Olympic

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opening ceremony downtown — as well as others who may be jittery about the 2016 Games' potential effects on the bucolic South Side park — might take solace in the fact that Chicago's return to the world's spotlight could occur in the same part of town where it all started.

The geographic and historic

links between the World's Fair site and that of the proposed stadium make comparisons inevitable. Washington and Jackson parks share both an architect — the legendary Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed the World's Fair landscape and, with his partner Calvert Vaux, that of Washington Park — and an important connector, the Midway Plaisance. The Midway, of course, was the site of the fair's most popular attractions, including the original Ferris wheel.

Phil Enquist and Tom Kerwin of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, coordinating architects and master planners for the

in just over a century

Olympic bid, see connections between then and now.

"One of the big ideas of the Olympic master plan is that it's integrated into our existing park system, which was set up at that time by Daniel Burnham," Kerwin said, referring to the fair's organizer, who later authored the Chicago Plan of 1909. "The Burnham plan and the Olympic movement were founded in a similar time frame, and that's part of what makes the Washington Park possibility so exciting."

It's too early to say whether the Olympic stadium might specifically refer visually to the fair's legacy — the design is still

in planning — but SOM is already picturing possibilities.

"Imagine the marathon runners coming south down the lakefront to Jackson Park, then west across the Midway in front of the University of Chicago, into Washington Park and up into the stadium — it would be incredibly dramatic," Enquist said. "What a phenomenal series of public rooms that engages."

Will the snake of 1893 swallow its tail in 2016? We'll know more Friday, when additional details about the Olympic master plan are to be released. Stay tuned.

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The site of the 1893 World's Fair, if Mayor Daley has his way, will be close to the site of the 2016 Olympics.