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Barack Obama's Great Tower of Nothing: Gentrification on a Presidential Level



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In Chicago, a low but persistent rumbling is heard these days, especially on the South Side. It is Frederick Law Olmsted, America's greatest landscape architect and the planner of what would become the city's Jackson Park, turning in his grave and muttering Victorian imprecations against Barack Obama and his eponymous foundation.

Why? Before we get to that, let's see what Olmsted wrote back in 1871 (the year of the Great Chicago Fire), when Hyde Park, Woodlawn, South Shore and other southern

lakefront precincts – what would now be classified as inner-city neighborhoods – were still remote, barely settled suburbs of a fast-growing city:

There is but one object of scenery near Chicago of special grandeur or sublimity, and that, the lake, can be made by artificial means no more grand or sublime. By no practical elevation of artificial hills, that is to say, would the impression of the observer in overlooking it be made more profound. The lake may, indeed, be accepted as fully compensating for the absence of sublime or picturesque elevations of land.

There are three elements of scenery however, which must be regarded as indispensable to a fine park to be formed on your site, the first being turf, the second foliage, the third still water. For each of these you are bound, at the outset, to make the best of your opportunities, because if you do not, posterity will be likely to lay waste to what you have done, in order to prepare something better.

Prophetic words. The Obama Foundation, together with city government and the University of Chicago, is now indeed laying waste to one of Olmsted's major urban landscaping accomplishments, and not in order to replace it with something better.

If Obama, the U. of C. and City Hall have their way, a large chunk – two square blocks, to be exact – of Jackson Park, one of the jewels of Chicago's 19th century park and boulevard system, will be repurposed, denuded and rendered unrecognizable. If the deal goes through as planned, the private and unaccountable Obama Foundation will be allowed to lease 19.3 acres of prime lakefront land forever for the grand total of one dollar. This stolen public space will house the Obama non-Library, formally dubbed the Obama Presidential Center. (Breaking news: On Wednesday, the Chicago City Council unanimously approved the deal transferring control of the parkland to the Obama Foundation and committing the city to costly "road and pedestrian improvements." The foundation plans to break ground in 2019, pending federal approval and resolution of lawsuits filed by park protectors, as described below.)

The centerpiece of the OPC, hereafter referred to as the Great Tower of Nothing, is a 235-foot high structure (that's 50 feet taller than Rockefeller Chapel, the reigning monument to money and ego in Hyde Park) that is as cold and ugly as avarice itself. Although originally marketed as a presidential archive, the huge and handsomely endowed OPC will house no papers or artifacts of the Obama administration and, for reasons not fully elucidated, will have no connection to the National Archives and Records Administration. The actual presidential papers will be stored, at least temporarily, in an

abandoned furniture store in a distant and uninviting suburb of Chicago, which apparently will not be open to the public.

The bunker-like edifice, towering over a newly enlarged golf course, will instead serve the Obama Foundation as “an ongoing project where we will shape, together, what it means to be a good citizen in the 21st century.” It is becoming abundantly clear that in the Age of Trump, useful citizenship training will center on theory and practice of civil disobedience and mass resistance. But this is not the sort of “ongoing project” the Obama Foundation seems to have in mind. There is talk about “cultivating the next generation of leaders,” which suggests a long-term goal of using corporate largesse to churn out more triangulating Wall Street Democrats in the Clinton-Obama mold. To skeptics, it is not readily apparent how this content-free non-library, really just a big clubhouse sheltering the vaguely purposed foundation and fundraising apparatus of an ex-president who rarely speaks up on public issues, will secure our rights and liberties in an era of encroaching fascism.

Aware perhaps of the project’s political and historical irrelevance, the Obama Foundation insists that the Great Tower of Nothing will bring new life and energy to a comatose neighborhood. The OPC be a “new landmark for the Southside and an economic engine for the city of Chicago, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors every year, creating thousands of jobs – and will help to continue the revitalization of historic Jackson Park.”

These claims are typical pie-in-the-sky developer talk. Yes, the Obama un-library may well turn out to be an engine of development, but not in a way that will benefit the 99 percent. Quite the contrary, as we will see. And as for redeveloping Jackson Park: “No matter how they describe it, they’re taking away parkland,” says the redoubtable Herb Caplan, whose tiny Protect Our Parks group is suing to stop construction of the project, charging that it’s an “institutional bait-and-switch” designed to privatize the commons. This sets a terrible precedent for Chicago’s public lakefront, which by a city mandate going way back to 1836 is pledged “to remain forever open, clear and free of any buildings, or other obstruction whatever.”

So what is the underlying purpose of this over-scaled, oddly empty complex, which may end up costing as much as \$1.5 billion to build and endow, all to convert a rare spot of green in an under-parked city into yet another heavily trafficked, highly paved, tightly controlled space? I think it’s pretty clear, if you look at the players, history and trends. It’s all about gentrification, i.e., ethnic cleansing, which is already taking place in Chicago at a pace never before seen.

I contend that the plutocrat-funded Obama Foundation and Presidential Center play the same role in the long-term transformation of the city's southern lakefront that the Obama presidency did in American politics: that of putting a faux-progressive smiley face on the ugly underlying realities of institutionalized inequality, capitalist skullduggery and white privilege. As others have noted, this white elephant on the lake is actually a Trojan horse, using understandable but misplaced racial pride and identity politics and a fuzzy do-gooder mission statement to mask a real estate scheme that is all about neighborhood flipping and displacement of the poor.

A little historical context will help clarify things. In 1980 – about when Harold Washington was contemplating his historic mayoral run – Chicago's black population peaked at nearly 1.2 million. The Urban Institute estimates that by 2030, that number will drop to 665,000 – an astonishing 45 percent decline over 50 years. According to journalist and researcher Alden Loury, “The restrictive covenants, red lining and white flight of yesterday have been replaced by stiff resistance to affordable housing, high-cost housing that effectively prices out some people of color, and disinvestment in communities of color regardless of their economic heft.” The result is that the 20th century's Great Migration of African-Americans from the South has become the 21st century's Great Exodus from Chicago, a shift in direction driven by the same virulent, undying racism.

The University of Chicago, which engineered the Jackson Park non-library bid, is the institutional driving force of the Great Tower of Nothing. The University, which used federal urban renewal (or as James Baldwin liked to say, “Negro removal”) funds to boot thousands of mostly minority families out of Hyde Park and nearby Kenwood during the 1960s, no doubt sees the Jackson Park complex as an outpost of its own campus, projecting its identity southward and creating a larger buffer zone for its intensively policed, bubble-like neighborhood. It also serves to reinforce the university's deep and marketable connection to the Obamas (Barack taught at the law school; Michelle had an executive position at the medical school) and to the neoliberal wing of the Democratic Party they personify. But there is more at stake here: Since the OPC project was launched, the U. of C. has announced its intentions of building a 1,200-bed student housing complex nearby, as well as a “boutique hotel.” These ventures would be an unthinkable risk for the cautious institution were it not for the billionaire-funded and city-subsidized boondoggle anchoring the site.

It's all about property values, tax revenues and “desirable” demographics. Rahm Emanuel, Barack Obama's one-time chief of staff and currently Chicago's notorious Mayor One

Percent, speaks no other language. But what does Obama, Rahm's old boss and staunch friend, say about all this?

At a community meeting this past winter, Obama commented: "We've got such a long way to go in terms of economic development before you're even going to start seeing the prospect of significant gentrification. Malia's kids might have to worry about that."

If you can get past the dripping condescension of that remark, you encounter its Trump-like disingenuousness. Gentrification has long since begun oozing south of the Midway, the wide boulevard that once formed the university's southern border. Woodlawn, south of Hyde Park, was declared the third hottest neighborhood in the nation for the first half of 2017, with median housing values rising 18% in that time, according to the City Lab website.

If it wished to, the Obama Foundation could make a strong statement regarding the evils of gentrification and displacement. But that's not what the Foundation is about.

What it is about is raising money, great gobs of cash, principally by tapping the obscenely rich. In 2017, the Obama Foundation solicited no less than \$232.6 million. Million-dollar donations have come from such checkered sources as financier Ken Griffin (Illinois' richest man, who also gave \$20 million to the campaign of Bruce Rauner, the state's reactionary Republican governor), Goldman Sachs, Bill Gates and George Lucas – whose own attempt to blot the lakefront with a monument to self only recently went down to defeat, as I hope this one does too.

Why the super-wealthy are so eager to contribute to a paper-free "library" and artifact-free "museum" in a part of Chicago they are unlikely to visit is a question that invites speculation. One possible answer is that Obama is redeeming his chits from eight years of meritorious service to the ruling class, including his unstinting if unsuccessful devotion to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, an arrangement that would have transferred huge amounts of what was once quaintly known as national sovereignty to our transnational corporate overlords. It was just about the only piece of legislation that Obama was willing to get on the mat and fight for. No wonder he's expecting and receiving concrete manifestations of gratitude, especially from the tycoons who went unindicted and fully bonused-up after the 2008 meltdown, winding up bigger and stronger and more arrogant than ever.

What we do know is what the oligarchs paying the bills don't want or like. This includes attacks on the economic and political forces of gentrification, which they view as progress, or advocacy for affordable housing, or acknowledgment of systemic inequality and injustice, or demands for radical change on behalf of – among others – the many poor and

disenfranchised people on the South Side. This fundamental class bias – this need to be, as the professional fundraisers say, “donor-friendly” – explains the most puzzling gaffe so far by the Obama Foundation: its failure to negotiate a community benefits agreement with local organizations, which would increase consultation with neighbors and ensure that at least some needs are met and some fears allayed. This is one of the project’s multiple ironies: that Barack Obama, the one-time South Side community organizer, is now thwarting a South Side community from empowering itself and taking part in decisions that will affect it for generations. No longer needing the community’s votes, Obama plays the paternalistic benefactor, giving the neighborhood what he and his rich friends and expert staff know it really needs, and who cares what the non-degreed riff-raff think.

If billionaires want to throw their money away on a gold-plated cultural non-asset like the Obama Presidential Center, who am I to say nay? It is, after all, a free country, especially for those who own it. But let the fat cats put the non-library where, if it can’t do actual good, it will at least do less harm. There are hundreds and thousands of empty lots on the South and West Sides of Chicago, places where construction of any kind would be a plus, bringing some measure of hope and attention to depleted and forgotten neighborhoods. Jackson Park is literally the worst possible location for job creation, despite the Foundation’s claims. There can be no spin-off construction on what technically remains public parkland, no next-door retail or restaurants or residences. Yes, there will be some jobs attached, but they will be classic examples of what author David Graeber terms “bullshit jobs,” PR and legal and security and administrative sinecures that are at best unnecessary and at worst pernicious and/or absurd: e.g., well-paid fundraisers raising funds to hire more fundraisers to raise more funds, ad infinitum. The Obama Foundation and other Establishment-blessed philanthropies of its type are expressly designed to manufacture a certain kind of liberal bullshit. By turning stark social and economic conflicts into fundable, non-threatening “programming,” they lubricate the squeaky gears of the social order rather than confronting its stubborn contradictions. The astronomical salaries paid to Obama Foundation leadership – in 2017, the executive director and CEO earned a combined \$1.48 million – suggest that the organization is unlikely to pit itself against the capitalist inequities that shred the social fabric and are the bottom line in the South Side’s racialized poverty equation.

I earlier described the Obama Foundation’s Jackson Park follies as a Trojan horse, but perhaps Potemkin village is the better metaphor. The proposed complex is a spectacle that symbolizes community life and culture and memory and scholarship and public purpose

without actually containing anything of historical value – just as the Obama administration symbolized progressive politics and racial advancement, concealing its chronic and self-neutering passivity, dead-centrist philosophy and unquestioned allegiance to the powers that be behind a façade of faux-populist rhetoric and wispy good intentions. Chicago doesn't need this hollow monument to gentrification, elitism and privatization on its lakefront. We as a nation don't need more crumbs from the tables of the billionaires who choke and starve us, or more tainted foundation dollars turning angry activists into tame “social entrepreneurs.”

What we do need is tough, radical, grassroots democracy – which is to say, the community itself, and not self-appointed champions with their own agenda, taking on the strategic neglect and cancerous disinvestment that constitute slow-motion ethnic cleansing. In the unlikely event that Barack Obama really wants to make life better for all on the South Side of Chicago, he will need to come down from his sky-scraping glass and concrete fortress and join those on the ground, listening to what they say. If Obama could do that, which at this point he cannot, he might come to the sobering conclusion that his world is not their world, his friends are not their friends, and his hopes and dreams, as embodied in his fraudulent and destructive non-library, are built on their despair.