The Urban Simulation Team at UCLA is using real-time visual simulation technology to recreate Chicago’s famous White City. The completed model will allow users to stroll along the Court of Honor, tour the Wooded Island, and marvel at the fair’s classical structures from a gondola, just as in 1893.

The humanistic promise of virtual reality reconstructions is that they provide the opportunity to explore a surrogate for a world that no longer exists, thereby allowing users to expand their understanding of a specific time and place. But the three-dimensional computer model alone is unable to convey the social context and historical narratives of even the most compelling virtual world. For users to make sense of the reconstruction in a meaningful way, the virtual environment must also be layered with real-world imagery, primary resources, and subject expert commentary. It is the goal of the Urban Simulation Team’s real-time visual simulation reconstruction of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 to create such a world – a learning environment that fosters free exploration of a highly detailed virtual space augmented with resources to build knowledge about this seminal event in American history.

The World’s Columbian Exposition is a perfect test case for the educational applications of this remarkable technology. The exposition was a milestone for American architecture and urban planning. As Director of Works, Daniel Burnham coordinated a team of the most notable architects in the country, each designing one of the fair’s major buildings. As a group, these architects created a classical city that would have lasting repercussions on American design ideals and provide fuel for the American Renaissance and City Beautiful movements.

The exposition model builds on the Urban Simulation Team’s experience with contemporary urban environments and cultural heritage sites, including reconstructions developed in conjunction with the Israel Antiquities Authority of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount during the first and eighth centuries.

The World’s Columbian Exposition project is currently a work in progress. Plans for dissemination beyond the UCLA campus have yet to be determined. Inquiries from instructors, scholars, or institutions interested in collaboration or educational applications are welcome. For additional information, please contact Lisa M. Snyder, Ph.D., (310) 825-5660 or lms@ucla.edu.