

James R. Thompson Center / State of Illinois Building

100 W. Randolph Street, Chicago



Thompson Center © Eric Allix Rogers

OVERVIEW

This is the third time the James R. Thompson Center/State of Illinois Building, plaza and atrium has made Preservation Chicago's 7 Most Endangered list. However, imminent threats to the building's future require us to spotlight it again in 2019. Since it was built in 1985, the building's design and engineering challenges of the space have been a contentious topic for the city. However, it is an iconic representation of Post-Modern design by world-renowned architect Helmut Jahn.

SB 886 has passed the Illinois House and Senate. It sits now on Illinois Governor JB Pritzker's desk for signature, and he has less than 60 days left to sign it. The bill lays out the process by which the Thompson Center can be sold. Preservation Chicago encourages the City of Chicago to work with the Governor and the State of Illinois to Landmark this building to

James R. Thompson Center / State of Illinois Building

Address: **100 W. Randolph Street**

Architect: **C.F. Murphy, Murphy/Jahn,
Helmut Jahn**

Date: **1985**

Style: **Postmodern**

Neighborhood: **Loop**



Thompson Center © Ward Miller

protect its historically significant elements. While SB 886 does not require any purchaser to retain the historic Post-Modern structure, it does ironically mandate that any future development on the property must bear in whole or in part the name of former Governor James R. Thompson.

HISTORY

The Thompson Center/State of Illinois Building's design was meant to suggest a more open and transparent government while referencing the grand public buildings of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Architect Helmut Jahn specifically noted in a public lecture in the 1980s on the building's design that it recalled the massive dome and vast interior atrium space of the old Chicago Federal Building and Post Office designed by architect Henry Ives Cobb in 1905 and demolished in 1965.

The unique design of the Thompson Center has curved walls comprised of irregularly shaped glass panels which presented distinct challenges to the building construction methods of the 1980s. This resulted in construction costs being more expensive than originally projected. The Thompson Center inspired Helmut Jahn's much acclaimed and highly vibrant Sony Center in the heart of Berlin some 20 years later.

The Thompson Center was architect Helmut Jahn's most significant public building at the time. It was a bold design idea to represent the State's Chicago offices. Recognized internationally for its architecture, it served as a "second state capitol building" intended to project the State's influence in the largest and most populous city in Illinois. It was designed to capture the viewer's attention and signal its importance as a seat of government. The building's futuristic styling generated, and continues to generate, both support and criticism.

The structure's grand, 17-story atrium is topped by a vast skylight and stepped glass curtain-wall which spans the entry and extends across most of the building's footprint. This effect essentially creates a large public plaza both inside and outside the building's Clark and Randolph entry and extending to the concourse level of the building. It



Thompson Center © Mary Lu Seidel

was intended to welcome the public into a government building with accessible public spaces on multiple levels and extensive glass curtain walls to represent an open and transparent government.

The State of Illinois Building and its atrium were originally conceived to mix governmental offices with various services and retail, which was intended to reinvigorate the City's business district along Randolph and Clark Streets. At one time, public music concerts were held in its grand atrium space. This area of the Loop had once been the center of its theater and entertainment district informally referred to as Chicago's "Rialto District".

The "Rialto District" included the Bismarck/Palace Theater, the Garrick/Schiller Theater, the Woods, the United Artists/Apollo Theater, the Oriental Theater, the Colonial/Iroquois Theater, the Erlanger Theater, and the RKO Grand. Additional theaters included the Harris and Selwyn/Michael Todd Theaters around the corner on Dearborn, and the Chicago Theater, the Roosevelt Theater, the Loop Theater, State-Lake Theater, the Capital, and the Randolph Theater on nearby State Street. The Rialto District was supported by a vibrant collection of famous Chicago restaurants, including Henrici's, Toffenetti's, Old Heidelberg, Holloway House, Mayor's Row, Hoe Sai Gai, Stouffer's, and the Blackhawk, extending eastward to Wabash Avenue.

The site of the State of Illinois Building was previously occupied by the legendary 1,700-room Sherman House Hotel, which stood mothballed from 1973 until its demolition prior to the construction of the State of Illinois Building. Founded in 1837 and renamed the Sherman House in 1844, the Sherman House was a great landmark in Chicago



Thompson Center © Eric Allix Rogers

since its earliest years and was home to the College Inn, various hotel restaurants, and many jazz venues. The State of Illinois Building was intended to channel the energy of “The Sherman” and reinvigorate the faded Randolph Street Corridor, one of the oldest sections of the Loop’s business and entertainment district.

The Thompson Center building never achieved the vibrancy envisioned by Helmut Jahn and Governor Thompson. Its retail tenants have become more mundane over time and deferred maintenance has negatively impacted its appearance.

The State of Illinois Building was renamed the James R. Thompson Center in 1993 to honor the longest-serving governor of Illinois who served from 1977 to 1991. Governor Thompson was a strong proponent in the selection of Helmut Jahn as the architect for the new state office building. Additionally, Governor Thompson was instrumental in selecting the most extravagant and grandiose of Jahn’s design options for the building. For pop culture fans, the building is featured prominently in the climatic ending of the movie *Running Scared* starring Billy Crystal and Gregory Hynes.

THREAT

Legislation initiated when Bruce Rauner was Illinois’ governor has now moved forward to new Governor J.B. Pritzker’s desk for signature. Former Governor Rauner projected the building could generate \$300 million from the sale. 42nd Ward Alderman Brendan Reilly has doubted the validity of this sale price. We remain hopeful that prevailing political opinions will work to retain the building as a state-owned facility for the people of Illinois.

Preservation Chicago believes that the scale of the Thompson Center and its vast, open plaza and public interior atrium spaces add to Chicagoans’ quality of life by allowing light and air into a dense section of the Loop. If sold to the highest bidder, these benefits are almost certain to be lost. Additionally, the soaring central interior atrium was built by and for the people of the State of Illinois, and, therefore, should remain accessible to the public as a public



Thompson Center © Gabriel X. Michael

building. Conceptual drawings that increase density but retain the historic building have been advanced by Helmut Jahn and Landmarks Illinois.

The Monument with Standing Beast sculpture located in The Thompson Center's public plaza was created by one of the world's most noted Modernist artists, Jean Dubuffet. It was a gift to the citizens of Chicago and Illinois and must be protected. We've seen important works of 20th century Chicago public art removed (Henry Bertoia's *Sonambient*), whitewashed (*All of Mankind* mural by William Walker), destroyed (top surface mosaic of Marc Chagall's *Four Seasons*), placed in storage (Alexander Calder's *The Universe*) or sold at auction (Henry Moore's *Large Internal-External Upright Form*). 20th century Chicago public art was a 2017 Chicago 7 Most Endangered, so it is imperative that this great Dubuffet sculpture be protected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our 2019 call to action is twofold: first to the City of Chicago and then to the Illinois State Legislature in Springfield and the Governor's office.

Preservation Chicago urges the City of Chicago to move quickly to designate the Thompson Center/ State of Illinois Building as a Chicago Landmark. A Landmark designation could protect this building, plaza and public sculpture ensuring that these will be retained in any redevelopment of the site. Jahn's career began in Chicago and is now celebrated around the world. This is a building of the people, built as a monument and open to all, with many public spaces that should be forever open to all, and efforts to both protect its architecture and vision and activate the building should be implemented.

We call on the State of Illinois to prioritize preservation into its specifications for the proposed sale of the property.



Thompson Center © Ward Miller

As residents of the state, we understand the financial pressures that our legislature is working to address. Utilizing revenues from the sale the James R. Thompson Center would make a small dent in the unfunded pension deficit, but the history of Chicago's built environment does not need to be erased to get there. There are preservation-sensitive ways to offer developers the density they require to make the project feasible.

The State of Illinois and the City of Chicago need to work together to protect this significant building. A comprehensive redevelopment plan could correct the deferred maintenance. A tower-addition study by Helmut Jahn's design firm has suggested that the existing building could accommodate new construction that would add square footage while remaining sensitive to the historic building, atrium and public space. As of now, we want to see the building preserved in its entirety along with its public spaces, plazas and artwork.