

# James R. Thompson Center / State of Illinois Building

100 W. Randolph Street, Chicago



*Evening view of Thompson Center's curvilinear façade, principal entry and plaza with Dubuffet sculpture © Serhii Chrucky*

## OVERVIEW

For a fourth year, Preservation Chicago has selected the James R. Thompson Center/State of Illinois Building for our Chicago 7 Most Endangered list. The Thompson Center is an iconic and integral component to Chicago's downtown municipal core. The building's exterior is noted for its prominent curvilinear corner and polychromed facades and many public spaces, including open plazas and arcades. Its interior has a soaring, voluminous 17-story interior atrium, concourse-level food halls, underground pedways, and a CTA transit center. Public art is located throughout the complex, most notably the *Monument with Standing Beast* sculpture on the large open plaza by Jean Dubuffet, one of the world's most celebrated modernist artists.

### **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 / Deconstructivist

**Neighborhood:** Loop



*View from above the atrium floor's central rosette and radial pattern which creates the illusion of an inverted dome. Thompson Center © Serhii Chrukky*

Determined by elected officials to be too expensive to maintain and repair, the anticipated sale and deaccession of a public governmental building is cause for great concern. The potential destruction of the Thompson Center would be a huge embarrassment to both the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois and would rank among Chicago's most significant missteps of the past. Its loss would be included among the many world-renowned structures which Chicago has allowed to be wantonly demolished. Many of the demolished buildings were great works of art and architecture which have been lost forever.

Designed by Helmet Jahn, an architect of great note on the world's stage, the Thompson Center is well-documented, published and recognized as an architectural landmark in many architectural circles. From his Chicago architecture office, Jahn's extensive commissions extend to buildings and projects around the world. These include many tall buildings from Chicago to Europe and Asia. Opened in 2000, the enormously successful and popular Sony Center in Berlin, Germany was modeled in part on Chicago's Thompson Center. Both the Sony Center and the Thompson Center are among the few mid-rise structures by the firm and both serve as integral parts of Berlin's and Chicago's city centers.

At the time of its completion in 1985, the building's unusual design presented engineering challenges and generated negative publicity. However, it's undeniable that the Thompson Center is an iconic representation of postmodern design by world-renowned architect Helmut Jahn, and the firm of C.F. Murphy-Murphy/Jahn.

The building's primary facade transitions between a flat plane and a curvilinear-stepped glass curtain wall. Its design includes vertical column structures which originally supported granite slabs that continued the stone cladding outward from the base of the façade. These free-standing elements appear as fragmentations and a visual extension of the building's base which define the perimeter of the open plaza. The T-shaped forms attached to the cylindrical columns helped to demarcate the plaza. The granite cladding was removed from both the building and



*Original granite cladding and deconstructivist plinths at Thompson Center c. 1985 © C. William Brubaker, photographer. bruo03\_05\_gF, C. William Brubaker digital image collection, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago*

the columns in 2009 due to deferred maintenance. The concept of a building appearing to deconstruct or flay are evident in some examples of postmodern/deconstructivist architecture. Such ideas as this extension of the structure were popular with other architects of the period, and this may indeed be one of the first examples of deconstructivist architecture noted in a Chicago building.

Preservation Chicago encourages the City of Chicago to work with the Governor and the State of Illinois to consider a Chicago Landmark designation for this building in order to protect its significant features and overall design. Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker's authorization to proceed with the sale the Thompson Center does not require a future purchaser to retain the building.

Former Governor Rauner had suggested the sale of the Thompson Center site to a developer for replacement by a super-tall building as a means to balance his proposed budgets. Selling the Thompson Center appears to be short-sighted, and public assets including state-owned buildings should not be sold to the highest bidder by our elected officials. The potential sale of a significant public asset without recognizing the importance of the building's architecture is concerning. Without protections, the outcome from a sale will likely be demolition and new construction.

Preservation Chicago hopes that the potential sale of the Thompson Center will include a requirement that the building be retained and protected. Ironically, one of the requirements of the sale mandates that any future development on the property must bear the name of former Governor James R. Thompson. Once again, we are compelled to spotlight the building in 2020.

The Thompson Center serves as an important transit hub for the Chicago Transit Authority and connects many rapid transit lines at one central location. Additionally, it should not be overlooked that the Thompson Center is also part of an important governmental center in the heart of the Loop's central business district. Several of the



*Chicago City Hall/Cook County Building across from the Thompson Center and Plaza with sculpture by Jean Dubuffet. © Serhii Chrucky*

buildings comprising this governmental center are designated Chicago Landmarks including Chicago City Hall/Cook County Building and the Richard J. Daley Center. The George Dunne Building/former Brunswick Building by architect Myron Goldsmith and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill is not landmarked, however, this structure would likely meet criterion for a Landmark designation.

## HISTORY

The James R. Thompson Center/State of Illinois Building's futuristic design and program was unique and progressive when constructed. It sought to diminish the barriers found in traditional government buildings through an open, transparent structure with public amenities and open spaces. The public plaza, the covered arcades, the vast 17-story atrium, retail shops on the first two levels, the concourse level of restaurants, and the transit center were all integrated into a public building—"a people's palace" — with governmental offices located above. This was an extraordinary and revolutionary departure from the design, program and public interfacing of government buildings of the past.

Traditionally, government buildings were neoclassical in design with heavy stone columns and symmetrical composition such as Chicago City Hall/Cook County Building. During the mid-twentieth century, government buildings in Chicago embraced a modernist approach with rectilinear glass and steel structures such as Federal Center and Daley Center. In comparison, the Thompson Center took a radical new approach which was much more exuberant in its overall design. Its vivid colors, rounded shape and deconstructivist appearance contrasted wildly with the design conventions of more typical governmental building.

All of the Thompson Center's elevations are glass. The transparency of the main entry and principal elevation was intended to suggest a more open, transparent and dynamic interface between the people and officials of the State of Illinois. Additionally, the design and scale referenced the grandiose and magnificent large, public buildings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Architect Helmut Jahn specifically noted in a public lecture on the



*Upper floors, offices, elevator towers, and skylight of Thompson Center atrium © Serhii Chrucky*

Thompson Center in the 1980s that the building's design recalled the massive dome and vast interior atrium space of the old Chicago Federal Building and Post Office. This massive building, completed in 1905, was crowned by an enormous 100-foot-diameter dome, which made it four feet larger than the United States Capitol dome in Washington, D.C. The old Chicago Federal Building and Post Office was designed by architect Henry Ives Cobb and bounded the full city block of Dearborn, Jackson, Adams and Clark Streets. This grandiose building and soaring 16-story rotunda was tragically demolished in 1965.

The Thompson Center's awe-inspiring 17-story atrium is topped by a vast skylight and curving stepped glass curtain-wall which spans the corner entry, extending across most of the building's Randolph and Clark Street facades. This effect creates a large public plaza both on the interior and exterior of the building's main entry, extending to the concourse level of the structure. The design feature was intended to welcome the public into a government building. An additional reference to the soaring dome of the old Chicago Federal Building is an illusion to an inverted dome. This illusion is further simulated by the central rosette and radiating pattern of the main floor and concourse levels of the atrium when viewed from above. The radial floor pattern extends beyond the atrium to the exterior plaza.

The Thompson Center was architect Helmut Jahn's most significant public building at the time of its completion. 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 great support and criticism.

The innovative design of the Thompson Center's curvilinear walls comprised of irregularly shaped glass panels presented considerable challenges to building construction methods of the 1980s. This resulted in higher construction costs than originally projected. Value-engineering to lower construction costs resulted in an alternate



*Aerial views of the Thompson Center's Clark and Randolph Street elevations with projecting skylight © Serhii Chrukky*



*View of Thompson Center's atrium and skylight © Serhii Chrucky*

glass being installed which significantly decreased the ability of the building's climate control systems to maintain even temperatures throughout the structure's various and expansive interior spaces.

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 Chicago's theater and entertainment district informally referred to as the Rialto District. Chicago's Rialto District once included over 25 significant theaters of which only a handful survive. The theaters included the Palace/Bismarck Theater (now the Cadillac Palace Theater), the Schiller/Garrick Theater (demolished), the Woods Theater (demolished), the Apollo/United Artists Theater (demolished), the Oriental Theater (now the Nederlander Theater), the Iroquois/Colonial Theater (demolished), the Erlanger Theater (demolished), and the Grand Opera House/RKO Grand Theater (demolished).

Additional nearby theaters included the Harris and Selwyn/Michael Todd Theaters (now the Goodman Theater) around the corner on Dearborn, the Chicago Theater, the Roosevelt Theater (demolished), the Loop Theater (demolished), State-Lake Theater (demolished), the Capital (demolished), and the Randolph Theater (demolished) on nearby State Street. Others included the Clark Theater (demolished), the Monroe Theater (demolished), the Today Theater (demolished), McVicker's Theater (demolished), Olympic Theater (demolished), LaSalle Theater (demolished), Illinois Theater (demolished), Majestic/Shubert/LaSalle Bank Theater (now CIBC Theater) and the Rialto Theater (demolished).

The theaters that survive today represent a small fraction of those that once defined Chicago's Rialto District which was said to have rivaled the Broadway theater district in New York City.

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The Rialto District was supported by a vibrant collection of famous Chicago restaurants, including Henrici's, Toffenetti's, Old Heidelberg, Holloway House, South Pacific, Mayor's Row, Hoe Sai Gai, Stouffer's, Pixley & Ehler's and the Blackhawk, extending eastward to Wabash Avenue.

The site of the Thompson Center was previously occupied by the legendary 1,700-room Sherman House Hotel. Founded in 1837 as the City Hotel and renamed the Sherman House in 1844, it was a famous destination in Chicago since its earliest years.

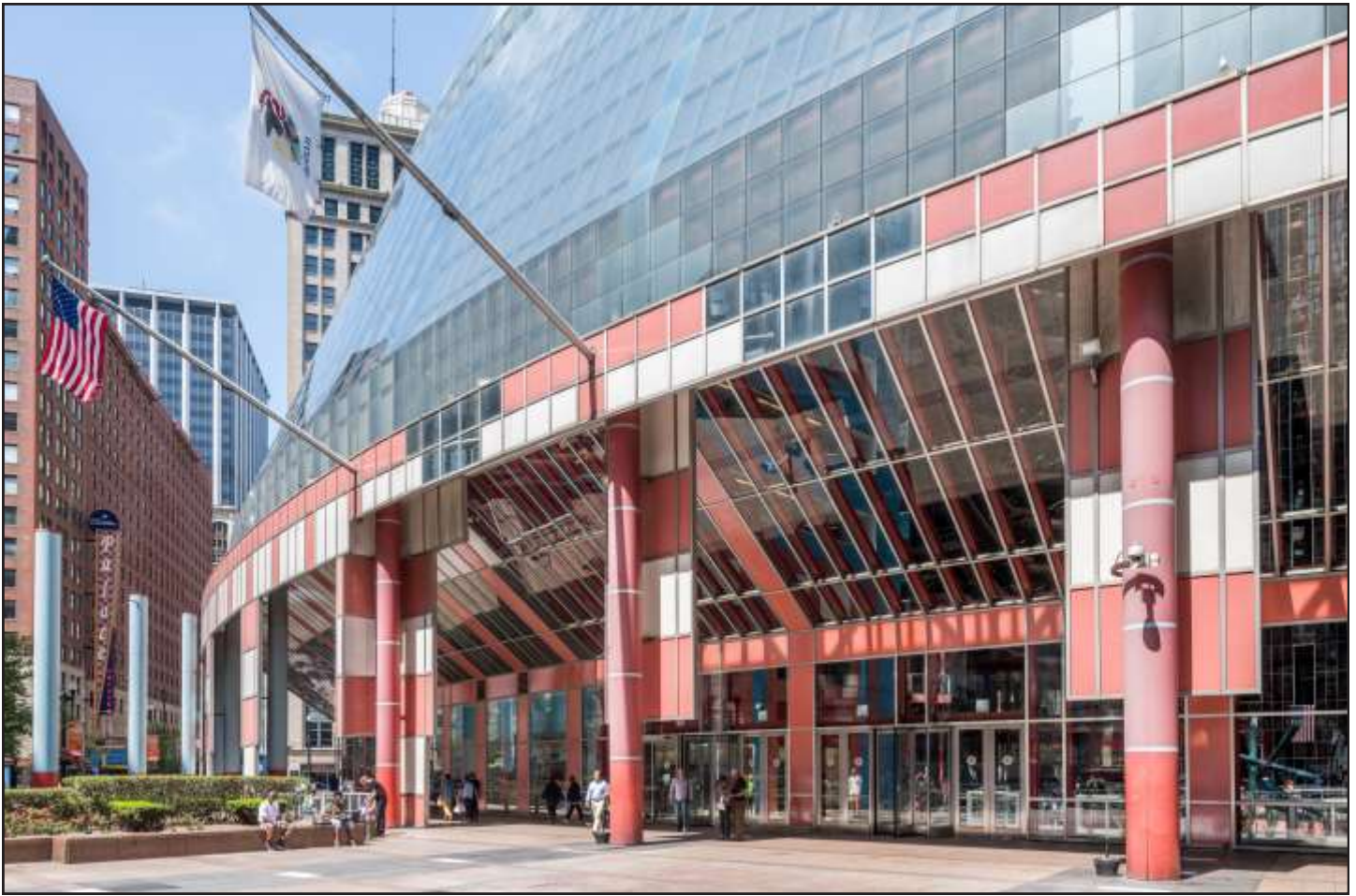
In 1911, a new 11-story Sherman House Hotel was built at Clark and Randolph Streets and was the fourth hotel of the same name on the same site. It was designed by the noted Chicago architecture firm of Holabird & Roche and was a thoroughly modern hotel. It was built with steel and masonry and considered a skyscraper. In 1920, the decorative mansard roof was removed and an additional six stories were added to bring the height to 17-stories. In 1925, an addition on adjacent land reached 23 stories in height and became known as the Sherman House Annex. Together these two buildings filled in much of the block on Randolph Street between Clark and LaSalle Street.

The Sherman House and Annex were affectionately known as "The Sherman." It was considered one of Chicago's great legendary hotels and continued to be a destination throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. It served as a popular anchor on Randolph Street and Chicago's Rialto district, bubbling with theaters, restaurants and hotels.

The Sherman became a vibrant site for jazz music, dances, and proms and was famous for its many restaurants and venues including The College Inn, Panther Room, Well of the Sea, Celtic Cafe and places as The Scuttlebutt Lounge which featured entertainer Hots Michaels for years. It was a large scale hotel and a swanky destination. It stood in contrast to the equally legendary but much more staid and elegant Palmer House Hotel with its world-famous Empire Room.



*Lower levels of Thompson Center atrium with retail storefronts © Serhii Chrukky*



*Plaza and principal entry to Thompson Center from Clark and Randolph Streets © Serhii Chrucky*

In approximately 1972, the decision was made to close The Sherman House and demolish the building, except its steel frame, and reconstruct a new Sherman House Hotel. This was an unusual idea for the time, however a modern glass curtain wall cladding on the old steel framework from 1911 and 1920 would allow it to appear to be an entirely new building. After The Sherman House's closing in 1973 and a successful sale of the contents of the hotel, the building sat vacant for approximately seven years while ownership unsuccessfully pursued development financing for the facade demolition and reconstruction. The vacant building became a symbol of the urban decay of the city center. During this time period, older buildings often languished as attention shifted to newer structures.

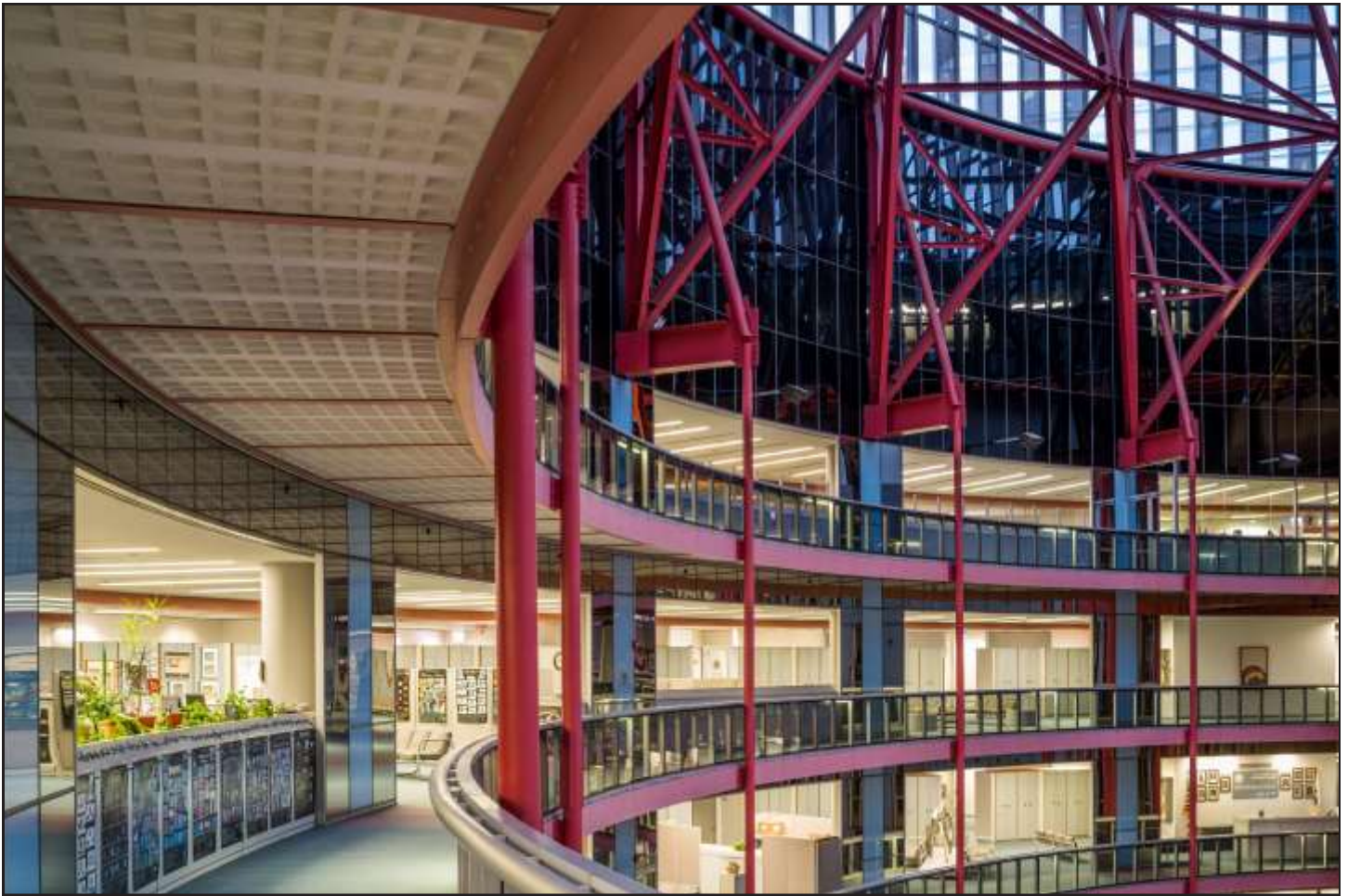
The Sherman House stood mothballed from 1973 until its demolition prior to the construction of the State of Illinois Building. In 1980, then Governor Jim Thompson and the State of Illinois acquired the site for a new state office building designed by C.F. Murphy and architect Helmut Jahn. Of the several proposals submitted by the architects, the one selected by Governor Thompson was the most radical and unconventional building design with an unusual curving shape and with a large plaza and a vast interior atrium.

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 former 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. For pop culture fans, the building is featured prominently in the climatic ending of the movie *Running Scared* starring Billy Crystal and Gregory Hynes. In February 1992, Laurie Anderson performed a multimedia work called *Voices From the Beyond*, specifically designed for the atrium of the State of Illinois Building.



*Thompson Center skylight and atrium with view of principal entry © Serhii Churkyy*



*View of Thompson Center's upper level offices and corridor overlooking the atrium © Serhii Chrucky*

## THREAT

Governor J.B. Pritzker signed legislation to move forward with plans to sell the James R. Thompson Center. Former Governor Bruce Rauner estimated the sale would generate \$300 million in revenue; a figure that is likely optimistic. Additionally, the Rauner administration's cost estimates to repair the Thompson Center appear to be highly inflated. It's likely that the true cost to repair the Thompson Center is significantly less than current estimates, and independent firms should be engaged to prepare an assessment free from political influence.

The public listing of the building for sale has not yet been released. Without protections for the Thompson Center, there is concern the building will be sold to a developer seeking to demolish it and maximize height in a newly constructed, super-tall building on the site. In fact, zoning and maximum building height was one of the central friction points between Governor Rauner's and Mayor Emanuel's Administrations.

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 building. Conceptual drawings that increase density but retain the historic building have also been advanced by Helmut Jahn and Landmarks Illinois. The "Postmodern People's Palace" should remain in the realm and domain of the people of Illinois.

The sculpture *Monument with Standing Beast* located in the Thompson Center's public plaza was created by one of the world's most noted modernist artists, Jean Dubuffet. This is one of Chicago's great 20th century public sculptures by an internationally recognized artist. It was presented as a gift to the citizens of Chicago and Illinois and its imperative that this great Dubuffet sculpture be protected. Chicago's 20th century downtown public art



Thompson Center © Serhii Chrukky

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was a 2017 Chicago 7 Most Endangered and it remains under continued threat. Important works of 20th century Chicago public art that have been lost include: the removal of Alexander Calder's *The Universe*, the removal of Henry Bertoia's *Sonambient*, the destruction of the top surface of Marc Chagall's *Four Seasons* mosaic, and the sale at auction of Henry Moore's *Large Internal-External Upright Form*.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations regarding the Thompson Center are directed toward the City of Chicago and State of Illinois. Preservation Chicago urges the City of Chicago to quickly move to designate the Thompson Center/ State of Illinois Building as a Chicago Landmark. A Landmark designation would protect this building, plaza and public sculpture, ensuring that these will be retained in any redevelopment of the site. Chicago Landmark designation requires a building to meet two of seven criteria. The Thompson Center would likely meet or exceed the minimum threshold for designation. These include:

- *Criteria 1:* Value as an Example of City, State or National Heritage for “its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois or the United States.”
- *Criteria 4:* Exemplary Architecture for “its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.”
- *Criteria 5:* Significant Architect or Designer for “its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history of development of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.”

Criteria 5 applies to Helmut Jahn and C.F. Murphy/Jahn, for a world-renowned architect and the firm's exemplary work. 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 remain forever open to all. Efforts to both protect its architecture and vision and to activate the building should be implemented.

We remain hopeful that the building will remain a State-owned facility for the people of Illinois. Alternative ideas that could be considered include the lease-back of office space to the State as part of a sale at a reduced rental rate, or for the State of Illinois to be a co-owner or stakeholder in a partnership that controls ownership of the building. Funds derived from a partial sale of the commercial portions of the building could be used to help underwrite the necessary monies and funds to restore and repair the office portions of the building.

If the Thompson Center were to be sold to pay down the existing pension deficit, it would be a tiny “drop in the bucket” toward that goal. It would take the sales of approximately 500 Thompson Center buildings to fully fund the existing pension deficit. So why sell a historically significant State asset at all? The Illinois Governor's Mansion and the Illinois State Capital Building have both suffered from extreme disrepair in recent years. These two buildings were recently restored using a variety of funding sources, amounting to millions of dollars, to reverse decades of deferred maintenance issues.

If the sale moves forward, we request the State of Illinois to incorporate preservation into its requirements for the proposed sale of the property. As residents of the state, we understand the financial pressures that our legislature is working to address. Utilizing revenues from the sale of the James R. Thompson Center would make a tiny dent in the unfunded pension liabilities. We understand the State desires to sell the building, but demolition should be discouraged as a part of that sale. Creative preservation-sensitive approaches would allow developers the density they require to make the project feasible and successful.

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 building's deferred maintenance issues. A tower-addition and other studies by Helmut Jahn's design firm recently released indicate the flexibility of the site. They demonstrate that the existing building could accommodate new construction to add additional square footage while remaining sensitive to the historic building, atrium and public space. We request that the building be preserved in its entirety along with its public spaces, plazas and artwork.



*Thompson Center's glass curtain wall structure at principal entryway with view into lower concourse level © Serhii Chucky*