

2018 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

James R. Thompson Center



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

- **Location:** 100 W Randolph St., Chicago, Cook County
- **Built:** 1985
- **Architect:** Helmut Jahn
- **Current owner:** State of Illinois
- **Historic significance:** Chicago's best example of grandly-scaled, Postmodern architecture, the most significant architectural style of the last two decades of the 20th century.
- **Why it is endangered:** State of Illinois is looking to sell the building, putting it at risk of possible demolition.

Landmarks Illinois first placed the Thompson Center on its Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois in 2017. A year later, the Postmodern building constructed in 1985 and designed by Helmut Jahn, remains threatened as the State of Illinois continues to pursue a possible sale of the building that could allow new development on the site. Landmarks Illinois understands such a sale would bring needed revenue to the State of Illinois, but it cannot support a sale of the Thompson Center if it leads to demolition of the irreplaceable building, located in the heart of Chicago's Loop. Landmarks Illinois would only support the state's sale of this great asset if such a sale includes reuse options. Through reuse, it is possible the space could be a potential energy generator for a future corporate headquarters or the next trending hotel or condo project.

Last year, the state released an image encouraging full demolition and replacement of the Thompson Center with a new super tower. In response, architect Helmut Jahn released his own re-envisioning of the Thompson Center, which includes a new, approximately 13,000-square-foot tower to house a hotel and residences. According to the design, the new tower would be carved into the existing complex at the southwest corner of the block and connect to the existing building up to level four. Jahn demonstrates how the remainder of the existing building can be utilized as office space and the atrium opened, similar to his design for the Sony Center in Berlin,

as an exciting open-air public space with shops, restaurants and activities that would make the complex a new and exciting destination.

As of now, the fate of the Thompson Center continues to be at a standstill legislatively giving preservationists more time to explore feasible options for the building. Since including the Thompson Center on its 2017 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois, Landmarks Illinois has commissioned renderings that visually demonstrate Thompson Center's ability to be privately redeveloped as an exciting mixed-use destination, which could also include the addition of a super tower at the southwest corner of the block to maximize zoning and revenue on the site.

Reuse of the Thompson Center is also the right thing to do economically, environmentally and architecturally. Demolition would be complicated with an existing CTA station on the site, and demo costs are anticipated to be no less than \$15 million to \$20 million. A developer looking to reuse the existing Thompson Center also could take advantage of other incentives. The Thompson Center's eligibility for listing in the National Register of Historic Places was determined in 2009. A full rehabilitation and reuse of the Thompson Center, without a tower addition, could be undertaken using the Federal Historic Tax Credit, the very incentive that continues to allow some of Chicago's greatest landmarks, such as the Chicago Athletic Association, the Wrigley Building and the IBM Building, to be economically brought back to life.

The Thompson Center is locally significant as Chicago's best example of grandly-scaled, Postmodern architecture, the most significant architectural style of the last two decades of the 20th century. Its broad plaza, prominently marked by Jean Dubuffet's whimsical sculpture Monument with Standing Beast, continues a three-block path of great public artwork plazas, from 69 W. Washington St. with *Miro's Moon, Sun, and One Star*, to *The Picasso* at Daley Plaza to Thompson Center's plaza. While not officially designated, Jahn forged a landmark with Thompson's Center's building design and setting.

The Thompson Center's voluminous atrium is also reminiscent of monumental and bygone public spaces. At the time of its opening in 1985, the [Chicago Tribune's architectural critic Paul Gapp wrote](#), "What we did not have in Chicago until Jahn designed the center was a contemporary vertical space of such splendid and theatrical dimensions." Regarding the Center's curved glass facades, which provide a break in the streetscape of surrounding linear office towers, Gapp wrote, "In a city where architects so long worshiped the 90-degree angle and black curtain walls, the center's asymmetry and multicolored skin appear as almost impudent nose-thumbing at the past."



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

What you can do:

- [Contact Governor Bruce Rauner](#) to voice support for the sale of the property, but not to endorse demolition as a preferred outcome. Give the real estate market the chance to explore reuse opportunities, which could include the addition of a tower to maximize the site. Reuse is the better choice economically, environmentally and for Chicago's architectural legacy.

Additional Links:

- Watch Nathan Eddy's 2017 film, "Starship Chicago" on the Thompson Center: <https://vimeo.com/241413433>
- "Rauner rejects huge Thompson Center offer," *Crain's Chicago Business*, June 22, 2017: <http://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20170622/BLOGSo2/170629928/rauner-rejects-huge-thompson-center-offer>
- "Rahm: I Offered To OK Sale of Thompson Center But Rauner Wouldn't Deal," *DNAinfo*, June 22, 2017: <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20170622/downtown/rahm-i-offered-ok-sale-of-thompson-center-but-rauner-wouldnt-deal>
- "Why Chicago's Thompson Center is worth saving," *Chicago Curbed*, Jan. 23, 2017 ([PDF](#))
- "Helmut Jahn's State of Illinois Center a 'spectacular building'," *Chicago Tribune*, May 16, 1988 ([PDF](#))