

2019 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

James R. Thompson Center

QUICK STATS

- **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 – its voluminous atrium and curved facades make it a one-of-a-kind downtown building.
- **Why it is endangered:** State of Illinois is looking to sell the building, putting it at risk of possible demolition.
- **Take action:** Urge Gov. Pritzker to sell Thompson Center with a requirement for retention and reuse of this irreplaceable building.



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

BACKGROUND

The Thompson Center, constructed in 1985 and designed by Helmut Jahn, 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 Thompson 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

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black curtain walls, the center's asymmetry and multicolored skin appear as almost impudent nose-thumbing at the past.”

CURRENT THREAT

Landmarks Illinois first placed the Thompson Center on its Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois in 2017 and again in 2018. Today, the building remains threatened as the State of Illinois continues to pursue a sale of the building that could allow new development on the site.

Governor J.B. Pritzker recently signed legislation that outlines a two-year plan for the building's sale. Landmarks Illinois understands such a sale would bring needed revenue to the State of Illinois, but terms of the sale should include retaining and reusing this irreplaceable building, an approach [supported by state statute for National Register-listed and eligible buildings](#).

Thompson Center's eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (determined in 2009) triggers this option and gives a developer the opportunity to use Federal Historic Tax Credits for its rehabilitation. Through reuse, it is possible the space could be a future corporate headquarters or the next trending hotel.



LI/Jahn 2018 reuse rendering image.
Credit: visualizedconcepts

The Rauner Administration previously 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 rendering of the Thompson Center, which included a new, approximately 13,000-square-foot tower to house a hotel and residences.

In 2018, Landmarks Illinois worked with Jahn and commissioned a [series of renderings](#) that visually demonstrate the architect's vision for how Thompson Center could be privately redeveloped as an exciting mixed-use destination, including the addition of a super tower at the southwest corner of the block to maximize zoning and revenue on the site. According to the design, the new tower would be added to the building's southwest corner and connect to its first four levels. The remainder of the existing building could 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.



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With or without a new tower, reuse of the Thompson Center is the right thing to do economically, environmentally and architecturally. Demolition would be complicated with an existing CTA station on the site, and demolition costs are anticipated to be no less than \$15 million to \$20 million. A developer looking to undertake a qualified rehabilitation of the building could use 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.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

[Contact Governor J.B. Pritzker](#) to voice support for the sale of the property, but not to endorse demolition as a preferred outcome. Urge him to sell Thompson Center with a requirement for retention and reuse of this irreplaceable building. Landmarks Illinois believes we need to 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. Landmarking at the national and local levels should be urged, which will provide economic incentives for rehabilitation and reuse.

FURTHER READING

- [‘Love it or hate it’? List it, Pritzker says – puts Thompson Center up for sale](#)
Chicago Sun-Times, April 5, 2019
- [Pritzker to sell Helmut Jahn’s postmodern Thompson Center in Chicago](#)
Dezeen, April 9, 2019
- [Multi-organization sign on letter to Gov. Pritzker](#) (PDF)
- [Watch Nathan Eddy’s 2017 film, “Starship Chicago” on the Thompson Center](#)
- [Rauner rejects huge Thompson Center offer](#)
Crain’s Chicago Business, June 22, 2017
- [Rahm: I Offered To OK Sale of Thompson Center But Rauner Wouldn’t Deal](#)
DNAinfo, June 22, 2017



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- [Why Chicago's Thompson Center is worth saving](#)
Chicago Curbed, January 23, 2017
- [Helmut Jahn's State of Illinois Center a 'spectacular building'](#)
Chicago Tribune, May 16, 1988