



**50TH LANDMARKS
ILLINOIS**

Landmarks Illinois 2021 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

JAMES R. THOMPSON CENTER *Chicago*



Credit: Sean Reilly

“The James R. Thompson Center represents the evolving relationship between citizenship and commerce, between democracy and capitalism, characteristic of 1980s America. It also happens to be a spectacular public space, well used by people across the city and region, as a site of protest, of direct engagement with government and as an integrated part of the life of the city.”

ELIZABETH BLASIUS
CO-FOUNDER, JAMES R. THOMPSON CENTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY



JAMES R. THOMPSON CENTER



Credit: Sean Reilly

LOCATION

100 W. Randolph Street
Chicago, Cook County

YEAR BUILT

1985

ARCHITECT

Helmut Jahn

CURRENT OWNER

State of Illinois

WHY IT'S ENDANGERED

The State of Illinois continues to [pursue a sale](#) of the building that seems to encourage demolition and new development on the site. The COVID-19 outbreak encouraged the 2020 Illinois General Assembly to [push the target deadline](#) for a sale of the structure to April 5, 2022. On January 27, 2021, Gov. JB Pritzker [announced the state acquired](#) 555 W. Monroe in Chicago for \$73.25 million and

will house many state employees who had offices in the Thompson Center. Logistics to clear out state offices and staff continue in preparation for the sale of the property. At the end of March 2021, 42nd Ward Ald. Brendan Reilly [proposed a rezoning ordinance](#) for the Thompson Center site, which enables the state to market the property for replacement by a high-rise redevelopment. And, lastly, at the beginning of May 2021, the state officially [issued its Request for Proposals](#) for the sale of the building.

This is the fourth year Landmarks Illinois has included the Thompson Center on its Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois due to the threat of a sale and possible demolition (previously listed in 2017, 2018 and 2019). The National Trust for Historic Preservation [included the iconic Post-Modern structure](#) on its 2019 national "Most Endangered" list as well.

Landmarks Illinois understands a sale of the Thompson Center would bring needed revenue to the State of Illinois. Still, terms of the deal should include retaining and reusing this irreplaceable building, an approach [supported by state statute](#) for National Register-listed and eligible buildings. Thompson Center has been determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and a nomination, prepared by the James R. Thompson Center Historical Society, is under review. Listing on the National Register would allow a developer to use Federal Historic Tax Credits for the building's rehabilitation. This is the same incentive that continues to enable viable reuse of some of Chicago's most significant landmarks, such as the Old Cook County Hospital and the Old Chicago Post Office. Through reuse, the Thompson Center could be a future corporate headquarters or the next trending hotel.

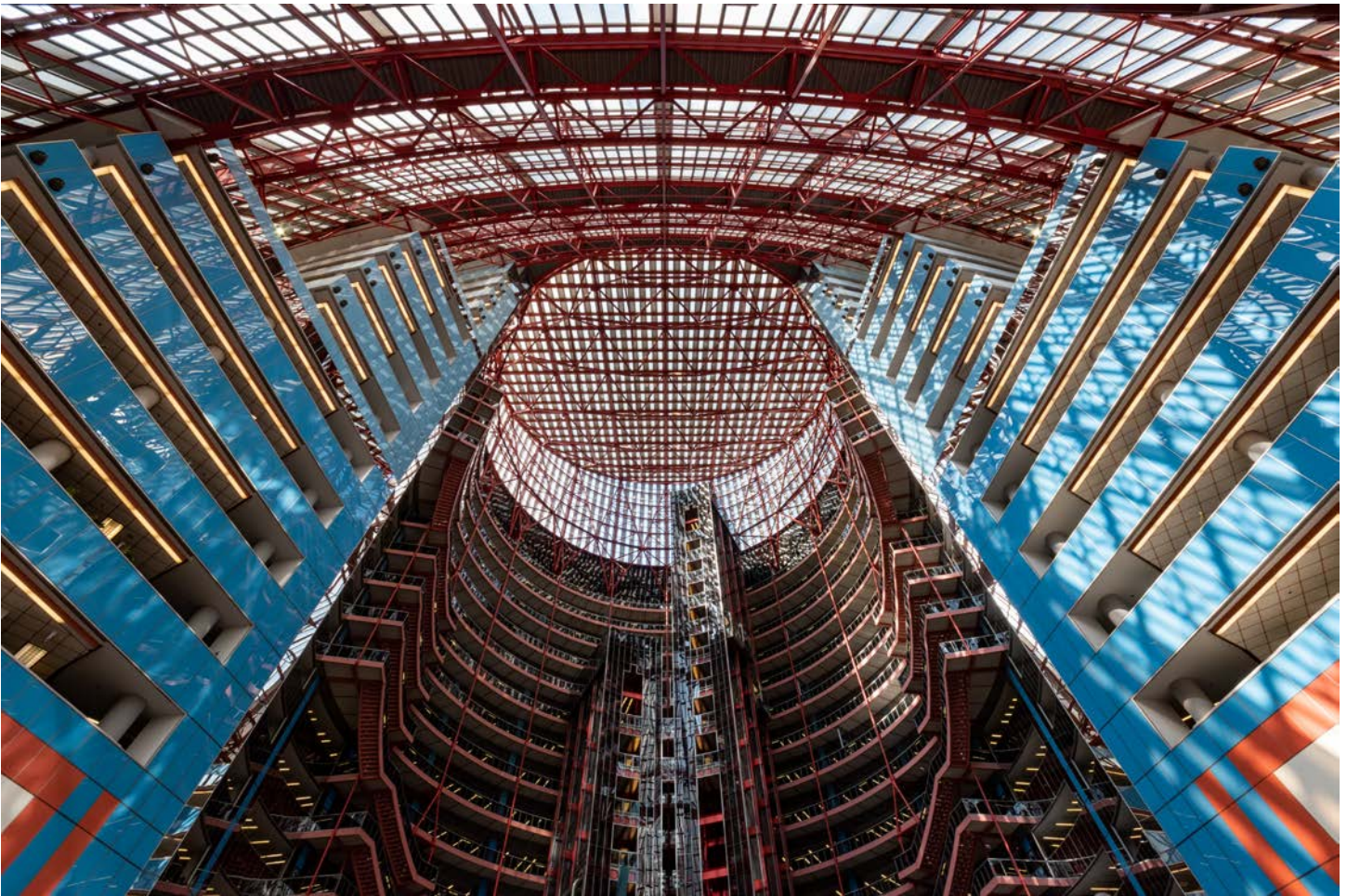


JAMES R. THOMPSON CENTER

Former Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner's administration previously released an image encouraging total demolition and replacement of the Thompson Center with a new super tower. In response, Thompson Center architect Helmut Jahn released a rendering that visualized a new, approximately 13,000-square-foot tower to house a hotel and residences on the site while retaining his original building.

HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE & 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 important 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 grand 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's design and the setting for Thompson Center create a modern landmark.



Credit: Sean Reilly

The Thompson Center's grand atrium is reminiscent of earlier monumental 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



JAMES R. THOMPSON CENTER

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."



In 2018, Landmarks Illinois worked with Jahn to develop a [series of renderings](#) that further demonstrate the architect's vision for how Thompson Center could be privately redeveloped as an exciting mixed-use destination. These renderings include a super tower at the southwest corner of the block to maximize the site's zoning and revenue opportunity and to connect to Thompson Center's first four levels. Thompson Center's interior open office floors would be fully enclosed to separate the public, open-air atrium space from private corporate space. The large office floors could accommodate ancillary hotel meeting space, innovative tech companies or other corporate offices.



The renderings also reveal a design change to the Thompson Center's plaza and street entrances to enhance the idea of urban public space. Jahn envisions removing four, two-story entrance bays at the plaza and similar removals at LaSalle and Lake Streets. The public would be able to enter Thompson Center's atrium, considered one of Chicago's greatest indoor public spaces, as an open-air, urban space with shops, restaurants and activities that would make the complex a revitalized and exciting destination. Through vents in the skylight, natural convection would temper the open-air atrium and promote its use as a 24-hour venue, similar to Jahn's design for the Sony Center in Berlin. While Chicago Ald. Reilly's proposed zoning ordinance could encourage demolition of Thompson Center, it also could provide an opportunity for investors to consider Jahn's vision for a reused and revitalized Thompson Center with a new high-rise linked to the building.

With or without a new tower, reuse of the Thompson Center is the right thing to do economically, logistically, environmentally and architecturally. Demolition costs are anticipated to be no less than \$15-20 million. Demolition will be complicated, and it will be difficult not to interrupt the existing 24-hour Clark and Lake Street CTA L station

Reuse renderings produced by visualizedconcepts for Landmarks Illinois in partnership with Helmut Jahn



on the site, which is one of the busiest CTA stations in the transit system. Reuse would divert unnecessary construction debris from entering a landfill.



(left to right) AJ LaTrace, Jonathan Solomon and Elizabeth Blasius of the James R. Thompson Center Historical Society. Credit: Sean Reilly

HOW YOU CAN HELP

[Contact Gov. Pritzker](#) and urge him to sell Thompson Center with a requirement for retention and reuse of this irreplaceable one-of-a kind, Post-Modern building that can become a revitalized and exciting destination. Landmarks Illinois believes we need to give the real estate market the chance to explore reuse opportunities, including the addition of a tower to maximize the site's zoning. Reuse is the better choice economically, logistically, environmentally and for Chicago's architectural legacy. Landmarking at the national and local levels will provide economic incentives for rehabilitation and reuse.

FURTHER READING

- [State of Illinois' RFP of the James R. Thompson Center](#)
- [State v. Jahn: The Thompson Center is dead, long live the Thompson Center](#)
New City, May 4, 2021
- [Fiscal Year 2022 Operating Budget - Illinois](#)
February 2021, Pages 48 and 246
- [Time for a fresh look at plans to sell the Thompson Center](#)
Chicago Sun-Times, April 12, 2021
- [How the pandemic made a bad situation worse at the Thompson Center](#)
Crain's Chicago Business, April 2, 2021
- [The Thompson Center: A Building Facing Demolition Threat in Chicago](#)
ArchDaily, December 29, 2020
- [Preservationists Rally Around Thompson Center as Pritzker Prepares for Sale](#)
WTTW, December 3, 2019
- [Thompson Center Information](#)
Chicago Architecture Center
- [What you should know about the Thompson center sale](#)
Chicago Curbed, August 28, 2019
- [Watch Nathan Eddy's 2017 film, "Starship Chicago" on the Thompson Center](#)
- [Why Chicago's Thompson Center is worth saving](#)
Chicago Curbed, January 23, 2017