

**SOCIETY OF  
ARCHITECTURAL  
HISTORIANS**

11 May 2022

Mayor Lori Lightfoot  
Office of the Mayor  
121 N LaSalle Street  
Chicago City Hall 4th Floor  
Chicago, IL 60602  
letterforthemayor@cityofchicago.org

Re: Opposition to the Proposed Demolition of the Century Building, 202 South State Street, Chicago, and the Consumers Building, 220 South State, Chicago

Dear Mayor Lightfoot:

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) joins with Preservation Chicago to strongly oppose efforts to demolish the Century Building, 202 South State Street, Chicago, IL, and the Consumers Building, 220 South State, Chicago, IL

The Century Building, designed by Holabird & Roche and completed in 1913, and the Consumers Building, designed by Jenney, Mundie & Jensen and completed in 1915, are the last two tall skyscrapers of the Pre-World War I Chicago School of Architecture. At 16 and 21 stories, they share a significant place in Chicago's iconic skyline. In this year's federal budget, Illinois Senator Dick Durbin introduced a \$52 million earmark to demolish the Century and Consumers buildings. This decision was based upon the dubious proposition, supported by the FBI, the AFT, and the US Marshalls Service, that the location of the towers on the same block of the Dirksen Federal Building will "create significant public safety vulnerabilities." This baseless argument ignores the fact that no explicit threats have been identified since the 1974 completion of the Dirksen Federal Building. Further, if this argument is true, then virtually every federal agency located in a US city is threatened by nothing more specific than the presence of tall buildings. By that flawed reasoning, the only safe, urban context for federal buildings is no context at all.

Downtown Chicago, like downtowns across America, is struggling to adapt to the new post-pandemic world in which the delayed return of workers has resulted in the closure of many restaurants, shops, and theatres. Demolition of the Century and Consumers Buildings would only further reduce the number of workers in downtown Chicago and replace vibrant urban fabric with vacant lots. As Lee Bey, architecture critic for the Chicago Sun-Times, wrote, "The buildings' demolition would create an economic dead zone on State Street, something that neither the street nor the city can afford. And it would be a shameful waste of some really good Chicago architecture."

The Century Building was largely the work of John Root, Jr., son of the firm Burnham & Root's founder John Root. Root, Jr's work on the Century Building led to his partnership in Holabird and Roche, later

renamed Holabird & Root. Root, Jr., would go on to design such important landmarks as the Chicago Board of Trade Building, 333 N. Michigan Avenue, and the Palmolive Building. The Century Building is an important transition between the Chicago School and the modern skyscrapers built following World War I.

The design of the terra cotta-clad Consumers Building reflects Jenney's instrumental role in the development of skyscraper technology. The Consumers Building is perhaps the last of the Chicago School skyscrapers, and both the Century Building and the Consumers Building are contributing buildings in the Loop Retain National Register Historic District.

The Century and Consumers buildings were nearly demolished during the Bush administration, when GSA acquired them to create a safe perimeter around the Dirksen Building, and later sat vacant for years. In 2015, after a planned expansion of the Dirksen Building complex was abandoned, the GSA put the buildings up for auction. In 2017, the GSA and the City of Chicago inked a deal with a developer who would invest \$141 million to rehabilitate the building into more than 400 apartments. Later that year, however, Judge Ruben Castillo raised security concerns that a proposed roof deck would allow a view into his chambers in the Dirksen Building complex.

After September 11<sup>th</sup>, the General Services Administration (GSA) focused on vehicle bombs and for blast protection, mandated 50-foot setbacks for new courthouse buildings. It is perhaps ironic, then, that when the FEMA published its 272-page guide on protection against terrorist attacks, it placed the Dirksen Building on the cover, and highlighted its successful deployment of bollards and planters as a case study in defensive architecture. Instead, the GSA seems to be focusing on a threat from high-powered rifles and decided that the Dirksen Building could not be modified to receive the extraordinarily heavy bullet-proof glass required to secure it.

Chicago can ill-afford to remove more of its architectural heritage. The legacy of using federal funding to clear entire city blocks is not ancient history in Chicago. In 1989, the city leveled an entire block of building that sat vacant for two decades, after an expected development deal failed to materialize. The Chicago Mercantile Exchange was demolished in 2003 for development, and the lot remains vacant. Recently, the state tried to demolish the Helmut Jahn-designed Thompson Center nearby, before backing off.

SAH believes that every effort should be made to protect the Century and Consumers buildings and consider their reuse. Preservation Chicago has proposed reimagining them as a Chicago Collaborative Archives Center, with high security and reservations required to enter the buildings and perhaps with the GSA as a partner to help control the perimeter and facades. After all, archives generally avoid sunlight exposure and windows, so openings can be selectively and carefully blocked from the interior of the buildings without impacting their overall principal facades. This could be a wonderful solution, with more national resources brought to Chicago for scholars, and students to study and explore—a real center, but we need all of the stakeholders to agree and make this an amazing center and solution to a complex issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B C G' followed by a horizontal line.

Bryan Clark Green, Ph.D., LEED AP BD+C  
Chair, Society of Architectural Historians Heritage Conservation Committee

cc: Mr. Kenneth Breisch, Ph.D.; Ms. Mary B. Brush, FAIA; Mr. James Buckley, Ph.D.; Mr. Jeffrey Cody, Ph.D.; Mr. Anthony Cohn, AIA; Mr. David Fixler, FAIA; Ms. Priya Jain, AIA; Mr. Theodore H. Prudon, Ph.D., FAIA, Ms. Pauline Saliga; Ms. Deborah Slaton; Ms. Victoria Young, Ph.D.; Members, SAH Heritage Conservation Committee.

CUT BELOW:

CC:

Senator Dick Durbin

Senator Tracy Duckworth

Members of the Judiciary Committee,

top-level officials of the GSA-Government Services Administration in Chicago and Washington.

GSA

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot

Samir Mayekar, Deputy Mayor

Economic and Neighborhood Development, City of Chicago

Maurice Cox, Commissioner of the Department of Planning and Development

Dijana Cuvalo, Department of Planning & Development--Historic Preservation Division ("Landmarks")

Alderman Brendan Reilly, Alderman of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Ward.

