

**SOCIETY OF
ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORIANS**

22 June 2021

Mr. Andrew Heckenkamp,
Survey & National Register Coordinator
Illinois State Historic Preservation Office
One Old State Capitol Plaza
Springfield, IL 62701
andrew.heckenkamp@illinois.gov

Re: Support for the listing of the James R. Thompson Center 100 W. Randolph Street, Chicago, IL

Dear Mr. Heckenkamp:

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) strongly supports the listing of the James R. Thompson Center on the National Register of Historic Places. Specifically, we believe that the Thompson Center clearly rises to the level of Criterion C (Architecture) at the statewide level of significance, and it clearly meets the additional requirements imposed by Criteria Consideration G (buildings less than 50 years old or acquiring significance within the last 50 years).

SAH has long believed that the Thompson Center is both worthy of preservation and reuse, and eligible for listing. On 7 February 2019 we wrote to Gov. J.B. Pritzker supporting its preservation and listing as a Chicago Landmark by the City of Chicago.

The James R. Thompson Center (originally named the State of Illinois Building), which was designed by Helmut Jahn of Murphy/Jahn and completed in 1985, is one of Chicago's most iconic late 20th century buildings. It is recognized nationally as an important example of postmodern American architecture, the most significant architectural style of the 1980s and 1990s. The Thompson Center features an innovative curved façade, which was designed specifically to address the other two government buildings facing it—the modern Daley Civic Center and the classical City Hall-County Building. Together, the trio of the Thompson, Daley and City-County Buildings and their plazas form a unique grouping of government structures that are as iconic as Times Square and as powerful as the city's other iconic grouping of 1920s skyscrapers—the Tribune Tower, Wrigley Building, 333 N. Michigan Building and London House Chicago Hotel.

The Thompson Center's expansive 17-story atrium is covered by a vast skylight and stepped glass curtain-wall, which spans the entry and extends across most of the building's footprint. The design creates a large public plaza that extends from the interior out into the site, visually and physically linking the soaring atrium with the entry at Clark and Randolph. To quote a 1985 Chicago Tribune article, "Helmut Jahn's State of Illinois Center is the most cerebral, the most abstract, yet easily the most spectacular building ever constructed in the Loop. Its interior is breathtaking...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." Jahn's stated goal for this design was to invite the public into this large government building through the use of accessible public spaces on multiple levels, with the extensive use of glass curtain walls intended to evoke an open and transparent state government. Originally named the State of Illinois Building, it was renamed the James R. Thompson Center in honor of Illinois' longest-serving governor. Not only was Gov. Thompson the building's namesake, he played an active role in the selection of the architect and of the design itself, demonstrating his commitment to the physical embodiment of open government from Illinois' highest office.

The Thompson Center clearly meets or exceeds the additional requirements of Criteria Consideration G, required for buildings less than fifty years old. The Thompson Center was recognized soon after its completion as a significant architectural landmark, one that challenged by its very presence the narrative of modern architecture in Chicago. From the outset, the Thompson Center and its vast atrium were a unique building type that blended governmental offices with commercial and retail offices in a single structure, with the intent to provide the State with rental revenue and to reinvigorate Chicago's business district along Randolph and Clark streets. Unfortunately, this intended vibrancy had a short lifespan, as the mix of occupants shifted to exclusive governmental use, public functions such as concerts were no longer scheduled,

and maintenance was deferred.

Rather than eroding the significance of the Thompson Center, these issues serve to illustrate the challenges facing the preservation of postmodern buildings nationwide. The United States is home to several iconic – and threatened – examples of postmodern architecture. Many have been recently altered, including the removal of the distinctive lobby of Johnson and Burgee's AT&T Building in New York City, the replacement of the façade of Michael Graves's Portland Building, Portland, Oregon. Others, such as Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown's Abrams House in Pittsburgh, PA, and Charles Moore's Hood Museum at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH were recently lost. Among the challenges facing the preservation of postmodern buildings, include complications presented by National Register criteria that are weighted toward older and more traditional architectural resources. Timely application of Criterion G to the listing of postmodern buildings is of critical importance: delay creates opportunity for unsympathetic alteration or outright demolition.

The Thompson Center stands as Chicago's most ambitious postmodern building, and its open atrium is a compelling symbol of open government and democratic values. Listing the Thompson Center on the National Register of Historic Places would help greatly to encourage its preservation, in no small part by making an approved rehabilitation of the building eligible for historic rehabilitation tax credits. These credits can provide a significant finding source that incentivizes the rehabilitation of historic structures, and encourages creative adaptation of them into new uses. The preservation and creative adaptation of the Thompson Center into a new use would be the best possible outcome for the building, allowing it to continue to function as an important architectural landmark and location of economic development that would serve the citizens of Chicago and Illinois.

The Society of Architectural Historians strongly supports the listing of the James R. Thompson Center/ State of Illinois Building on the National Register of Historic Places.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B C G' with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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

cc: Ms. Bonnie McDonald, President, Landmarks Illinois; Ms. Lisa DiChiera, Director of Advocacy, Landmark Illinois; Mr. Ward Miller, Executive Director, Preservation Chicago; Mr. Kenneth Breisch, Ph.D.; Ms. Mary 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.