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Helmut Jahn's James R. Thompson Center and the Aesthetics of Postmodern Citizenship

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"Love it or hate it," begins the summer 2015 feature in the web magazine *Dezeen*, "postmodernism is back in vogue." [1] One does not need to look very far in architectural circles to see that postmodern aesthetics—signature colors and shapes of the 1980s now deployed as jaunty retorts to the seriousness of the last decade's computational forms—are back in style. What do postmodern forms mean in the evolving cultural context of the 2010s? To cast that change into relief, it is useful to look back at a building that embodies postmodern theory in aesthetics and also in citizenship. After all, buildings began inviting skepticism in their own structural narratives only in reaction to the fragmentation of institutions such as citizenship.

Helmut Jahn's James R. Thompson Center, formerly the State of Illinois Center, opened in Chicago's North Loop in 1985. The seventeen-story structure contains 1.1 million square feet and is distinguished by a curving, reflective facade and full-height, 160-foot-diameter public atrium. A state office building and hub for government services, the Center houses tenants including the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Illinois Court of Claims. The Center is also the Chicago District Office of the governor of Illinois—the capital of Illinois is located in Springfield, a city of approximately 115,000 people two hundred miles southwest of Chicago—and the offices of agencies such as the Illinois State Board of Education.

Style and substance in the Thompson Center were inseparable from the start. Though embraced by many for the optimism its various jarring breaks from convention represented, the building eventually became the subject of intense criticism. Repeatedly described as being over budget, its total cost of \$172 million in public funds was erroneously measured against a publicized \$85 million cost for its core and shell only. [2] Later, scrutiny fell on its aesthetics, from its asymmetrical shape, to its salmon pink and pale blue palette, to its materiality and finishes. The building's very environment also came under scrutiny: miscalculations in the cooling system caused interior temperatures

[1] Anna Winston, "Postmodernism is back: introducing *Dezeen's* Pomo summer," *Dezeen*, July 22, 2015, [link](#).

[2] Helmut Jahn, Conversation with the author, May 4, 2015.

in its first two summers of operation to reach reported highs of 110 degrees, and impromptu shading devices were deployed in open offices to mitigate glare from the light that poured into the south-facing atrium. [3]

The Center's state of disrepair has been a featured topic in local news outlets since August 2009, when a six-hundred-pound piece of granite fell from the façade—leading to the decision to strip the arcade of approximately a thousand slabs. [4] In 2015 Bruce Rauner, newly elected governor of Illinois, declared that the State would sell the building, and voiced his support for a buyer who would demolish it. [5] While originally decried by some, the Thompson Center is now recognized by others as a rare hub for public activity in Chicago's North Loop; Lee Bey, former architecture critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and deputy chief of staff for Planning and Design under Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, has called it “one of the finest—and most used—indoor public spaces in the state.” [6]

The easy use of the word *public* to describe the Thompson Center can mask its confounding effects on citizenship. The building's rejection of modern style is well recognized; referencing classical expressions of civic unity and state power, the partial dome and diminishing colonnade are feinting references to traditional hierarchies and classical aspirations of democracy. Critics Paul Goldberger and Paul Gapp manage to both praise and chide Jahn as a postmodern stylist playing what became by the 1980s, in Goldberger's words “not any more than a game.” What all the talk of its appearance masked was the way the Center reformulates the relationship of the citizen to the State. The Thompson Center is a government building, funded by public money and open to the public, but its soaring atrium bears less resemblance to the “European village squares and America's big city plazas in summer” Jahn modeled it after than to a shopping mall: a retail space for retail government. Environment is implicated too, even here. “To make it possible year 'round, even in Chicago's frigid winters,” The State Capital Development Board boasts, “[Jahn] put his plaza indoors, under glass.” [7]

It would be reasonable to align the spectacular interiority of the Thompson Center with the kind of totalizing environment or “postmodern hyperspace” that Frederick Jameson identified in the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in 1984. [8] However, Goldberger's characterization of the building as “hyperactive” is more accurate: “[I]t might be called architecture on amphetamines, a building that is so utterly relentless that it seems never to let you go.” [9] The Thompson Center erases expected boundaries between interior and exterior and between building and infrastructure, confounding easy delineations of public and private space. Rather than expressing state power, as one might expect given its tenants, the building screens structures of government behind material and spatial spectacle.

While taking cues from the city's great commercial interiors, department stores and vertical malls, the Thompson Center was structuring a very new condition of citizenship, by situating government services in an intermodal transit interchange, permeated by multilevel interior urbanism. This early vision of government embedded in the social and physical infrastructure of the city is both empowering in the access it promises the individual and disturbing in the pervasiveness it allows for an atomized and distributed State apparatus.

Marking a transition in Jahn's career from playful exuberance to an

[3] Blair Kamin, “Thompson Center to Shed the Granite,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 15, 2009.

[4] Jahn countered by suggesting adaptive reuse. See Blair Kamin, “Chicago's Thompson Center in Sad State,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 14, 2014.

[5] Rick Pearson, Kim Janssen, and Monique Garcia, “Rauner wants Thompson Center auctioned off; sale would boost state, experts say,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 13, 2015.

[6] Lee Bey, “Save, Don't Raze, the Thompson Center,” *Better Government Association*, [link](#).

[7] Capital Development Board, “Background on the State of Illinois Center,” State of Illinois, March 1985, 13.

[8] Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (July/August 1984): 53–92.

[9] Paul Goldberger, “Futuristic State Office Building Dazzles Chicago,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1985.

increasingly refined techno-sublime, the Thompson Center's famous, almost visceral awkwardness suited the 1980s, an era of radical transformation in American life. Jahn's later work helped drive innovations that make possible environments so precisely modulated that the subject never perceives being compelled to enter, to move, to work, or to shop. Ahead of its time, and embracing technologies that were not yet fully tested, the Thompson Center fell short of this ambition; the building imposed its explicit and at times malevolent presence upon the lives of its occupants through subversion of comfort. Reaching for the sublime—eight hundred-thousand-pound ice cubes in the subbasement were to cool the building's air—the Thompson Center became better known for the ridiculous—110-degree temperatures in the atrium. [10]

The invisibility of contemporary building systems parallels the invisibility of contemporary government programs—what Suzanne Mettler calls “the Submerged State.” [11] If, as Mettler writes, “Americans often fail to recognize government's role in society, even if they have experienced it in their own lives,” this must be due in part to projects like Jahn's, which saw a future for the space of government as a continuation of the city, as invisible as it was to be inseparable from its fabric. [12]

In the Thompson Center, we can still feel certain control mechanisms at work when they break: when the temperature is too high, when the smell from the food court slips into the atrium, when a panel breaks or a carpet tatters. For these reasons alone, it is worth preserving as a reminder of how managed our contemporary environment—and our citizenship—has become.

The following portfolio juxtaposes photographs and drawings of the Thompson Center with texts produced by the State of Illinois, the architect's office, and critics at the time of its opening and since. The combined statements form an arc of expectations for the building—and for architectural criticism—over the past thirty years and remind us of the complex and evolving relationship between citizenship and the state.

[10] Capital Development Board, “Background on the State of Illinois Center,” 13.

[11] Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Programs Undermine American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[12] Suzanne Mettler, “Our Hidden Government Benefits,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2011.



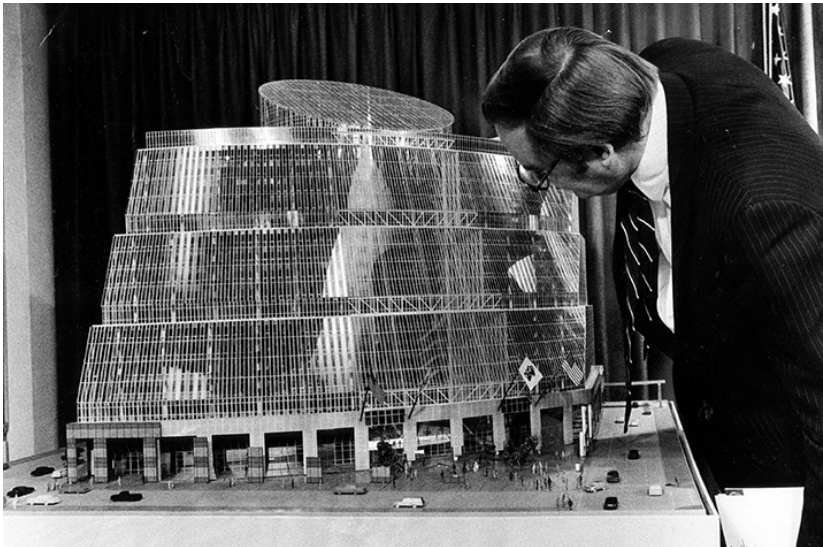
Courtesy of JAHN.

“The locals are calling it the spaceship and the Star Wars building. When it was dedicated a few weeks ago, the atrium was draped with a huge banner reading ‘A Building for Year 2000,’ and since then the crowds have come to gawk as they have not at any new building in downtown Chicago in years.”

—Paul Goldberger in “Futuristic State Office Building Dazzles Chicago,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1985.

“People take a building personally when they are paying for it.”

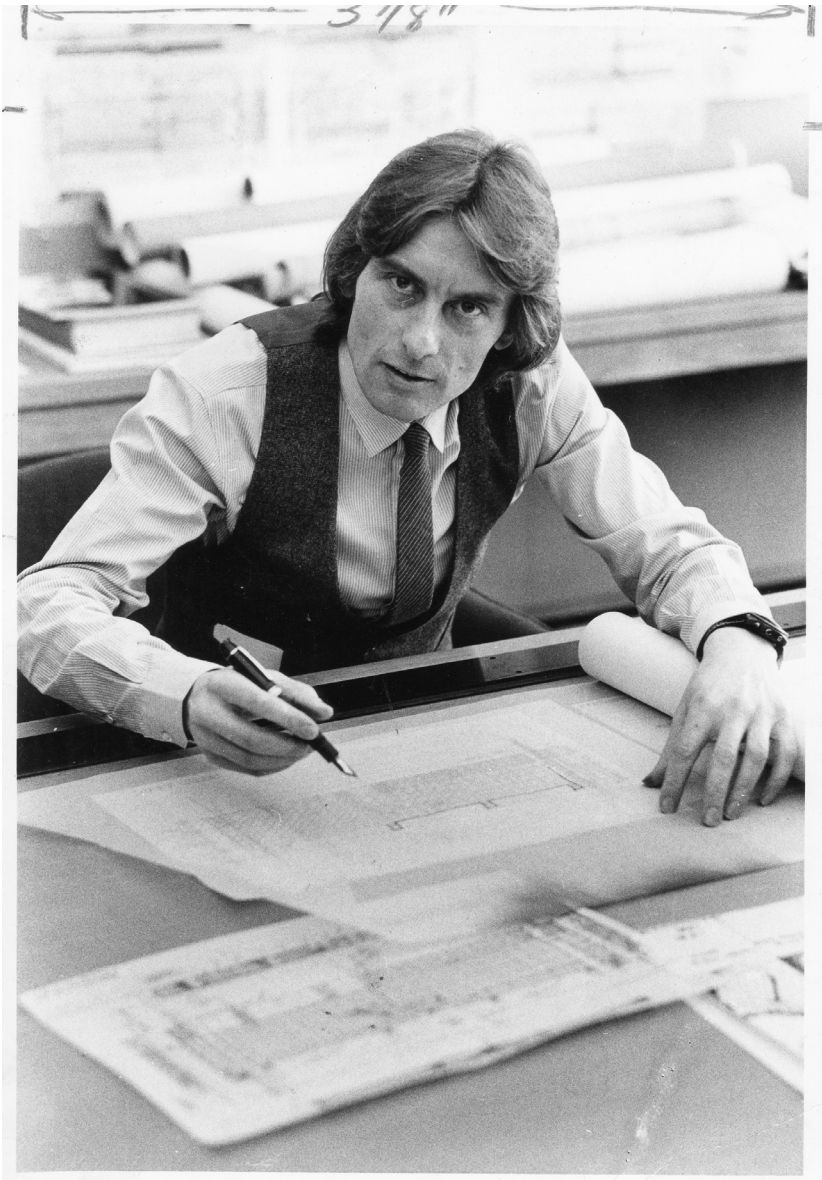
—David Breskin in “The Master Builder,” *GQ*, May 1985.



"Governor James R. Thompson unveils a working model of the new seventeen-story State of Illinois Building, February 19, 1980." Courtesy of James Mayo. © Tribune News Service/Chicago Tribune Archive Photos.

"We wonder if Illinois Governor 'Big Jim' Thompson gave taxpayers even the slightest thought last November as he finally moved into his nice new office (which includes a private elevator, kitchen, bath with shower and bulletproof glass walls). He'll probably slough off the cost overruns with a shame-shame on the architect and contractor (who billed out over their bids)."

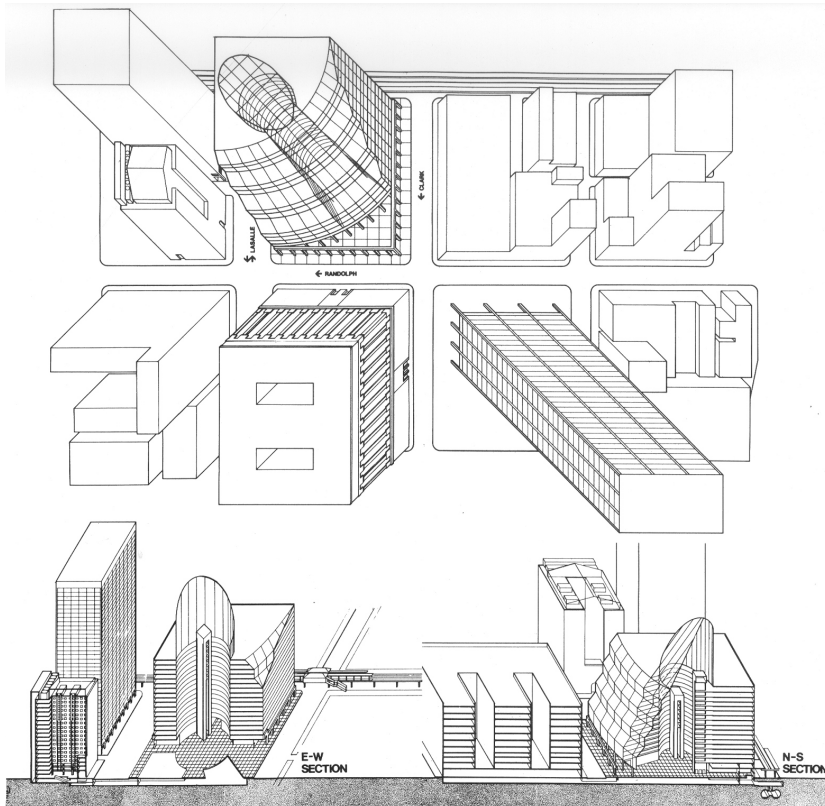
—Philip Schreiner, *Building Design and Construction*, March 1985.



"Architect Helmut Jahn, February 15, 1980." Courtesy of James Mayo. © Tribune News Service/Chicago Tribune Archive Photos.

"He has hot hands."

—Stanley Tigerman quoted by Blair Kamin in "Shunned here, Helmut Jahn is out to prove he's more than flashy," *Chicago Tribune*, January 25, 1998.



Courtesy of JAHN.

“The Daley Civic Center is probably the most brutishly powerful International-style skyscraper in the United States—a monolithic, brooding building that seems to stand guard over the Loop like a gargantuan armored knight. It is diagonally across Randolph Street from the Jahn building. Directly across the street is the City Hall—County Building, a classically styled structure whose huge Corinthian columns rise from a granite base.”

“Jahn’s prime acknowledgment of these two neighboring buildings came when he oriented the State of Illinois Center’s curved south-east facade toward the older structures. He made a secondary bow to the past by echoing City Hall’s granite in the base of his own building, and he carried on LaSalle Street’s canyon tradition by bringing the colonnaded west side of the Center out to the curb. Yet Jahn did not try to make the Center ‘contextual’ in the sense that most architects use that word. He does not believe in contextualism.”

—Paul Gapp in “Helmut Jahn’s State of Illinois Center a ‘spectacular building,’” *Chicago Tribune*, February 17, 1985.



Courtesy of JAHN.

“It seems not so much to have risen in the Loop as to have landed there.”

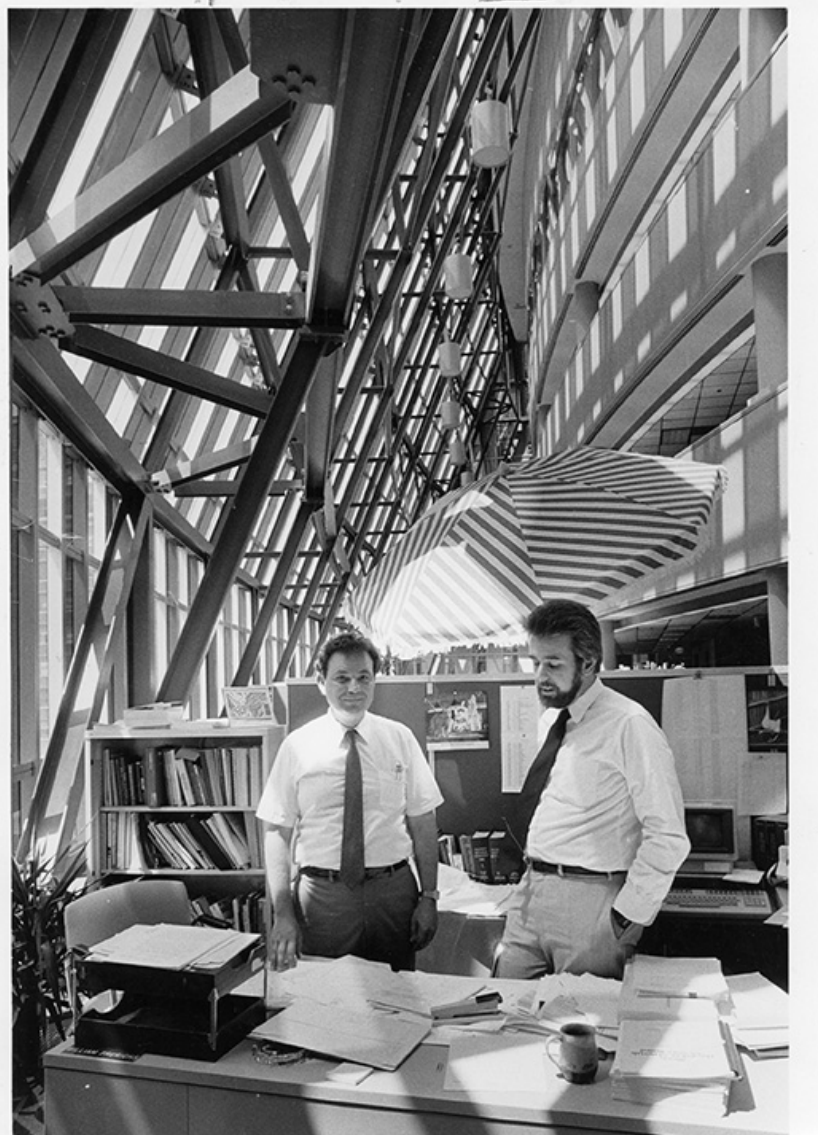
—Richard Lacayo in “The Battle of Starship Chicago,” *Time*, February 4, 1985.



“John Campbell, a comptroller’s office employee, switches on a fan on Aug. 5, 1986, in the State of Illinois Center. Temperatures soared into the 90s in the parts of the building during last month’s heat wave.” Courtesy of Ovie Carter. © Tribune News Service/Chicago Tribune Archive Photos.

“In warm weather, eight giant ice cubes, each weighing 100,000 pounds, are frozen at night [when electric charges are about half the daytime rate] then used to cool the building the following day. The 40-by-12-by-14-foot cubes are frozen in huge ice banks in the building’s subbasement, 37 feet below street level.”

—Capital Development Board, State of Illinois, in “Background on the State of Illinois Center,” March 1985.



“Joseph J. Annunzio, attorney general of the state environmental control division, and William W. Frerichs, assistant division chief, use an umbrella to battle heat and glare from the sun in the State of Illinois Center, July 16, 1986.” Courtesy of Karen Engstrom. © Tribune News Service/Chicago Tribune Archive Photos.

“Reuse Ideas: Medical marijuana farm. It’s essentially a giant greenhouse already.”

—Adrienne Hurst in “How the Thompson Center and Tribune Tower Stack Up,” *Chicago Magazine*, November 17, 2015.



Photograph by Rainer Viertlboeck. Courtesy of JAHN.

“Charged with creating an institution—with the caveat that it was to be a well-used and truly public facility—Jahn had drawn inspiration from two primary sources. One was the example set by the design of traditional capitals and other government buildings. From these, he took the idea of a spacious, domed rotunda—but reinterpreted it, in contemporary materials and shapes. The other was the lively activity of many European village squares and America’s big city plazas in the summer. That was the kind of use Jahn wanted for the State Center. To make it possible year ’round, even in Chicago’s frigid winters, he put his plaza indoors, under glass.”

—Capital Development Board, State of Illinois, in “Background on the State of Illinois Center,” March 1985.



Courtesy of JAHN.

“The blue panels of glass on the facade are surely the most disturbing thing of all. Their turquoise tone is a color that calls to mind cheap commercial buildings of the 1950s, bus stations and suburban schools and the like.... Is Helmut Jahn—whose sense of trends is as sharp as any fashion designer’s—doing this intentionally, gambling that the current vogue for 1950s design will eventually grow to encompass even the dreariest relics of that decade? I doubt it.”

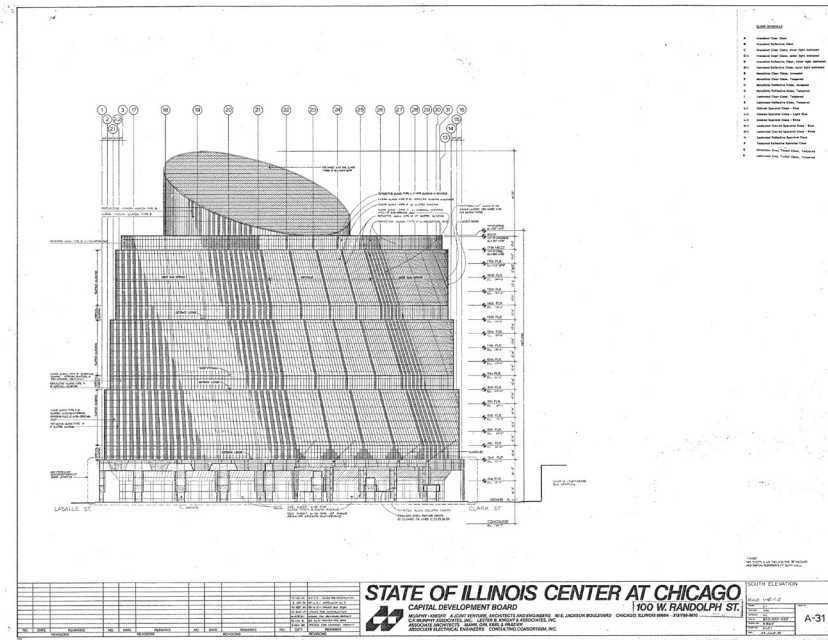
—Paul Goldberger in “Futuristic State Office Building Dazzles Chicago,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1985



James R. Thompson Center, State of Illinois Center, under construction, 1983. Photograph by C. William Brubaker. Courtesy of C. William Brubaker Collection, bru003_05_jF, University of Illinois at Chicago Library.

“Jahn’s final shaping of the center and his exterior declaration of its volumes came to little good. For all its glassy reflectivity and color, the building is a chunky wedge of little grace or elegance. No couturier can save the fat girl at the senior prom.”

—Paul Gapp in “Jahn’s State of Illinois Center Revisited: Strong Enough to Survive the Storm,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 1986.

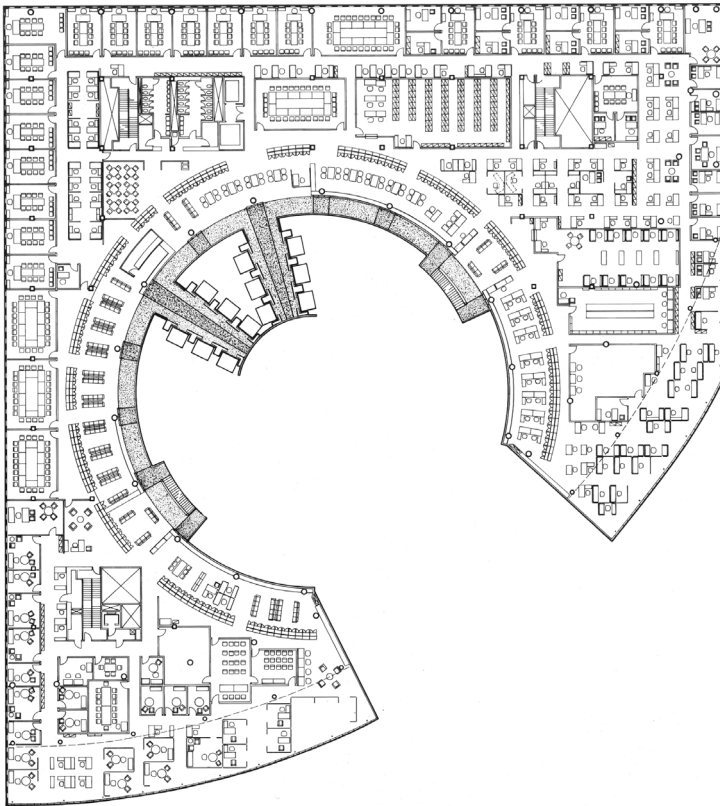


Courtesy of JAHN.

“The overall shape of this glittering and gargantuan object is not easy to understand. It is easiest to start with the floor plan, which is best described as a rectangle that has been broken by a long curve which runs from one corner to the middle of the opposite side.”

“The straight sides of this polygonal shape rise straight up, whereas the curving side slopes inward as it rises, giving the building its startling, rocket-ship-like profile from many angles. Within, there is a circular atrium which slices through the roof and emerges as a sliced-off cylinder that is the building’s crown, looking as if it were about to revolve.”

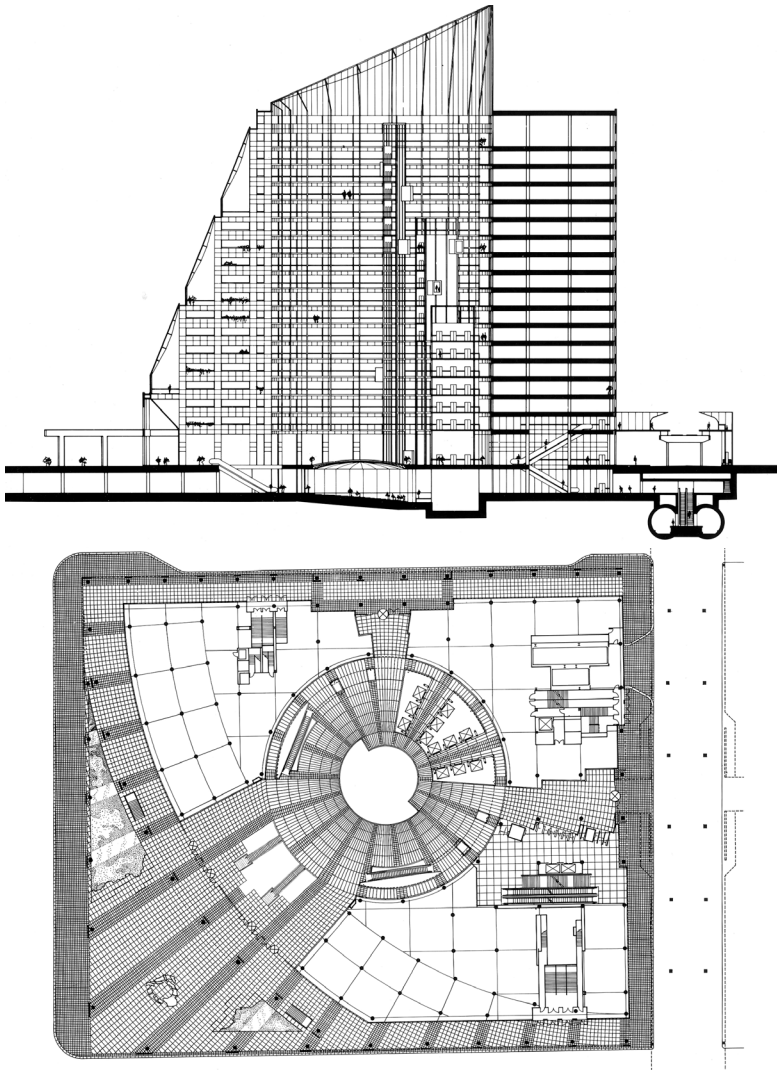
—Paul Goldberger in “Futuristic State Office Building Dazzles Chicago,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1985.



Courtesy of JAHN.

“The building’s odd shape has altered the maze of offices within each ring: Some are square, some rectangular, some combinations of square and curved. Some have narrow, pie-shaped corners, some have walls in no particular shape. Depending upon one’s sense of direction, this can be exhilarating or merely confusing. All such complaints pale in the face of one big gripe: Many offices don’t have doors. Even in a state where strong sunshine laws can make shutting one a civic sin, bureaucrats don’t like to do without doors.”

—Kevin Klose in “Illinois Building Stands Convention on its Ear,”
Washington Post, April 8, 1985.



Courtesy of JAHN.

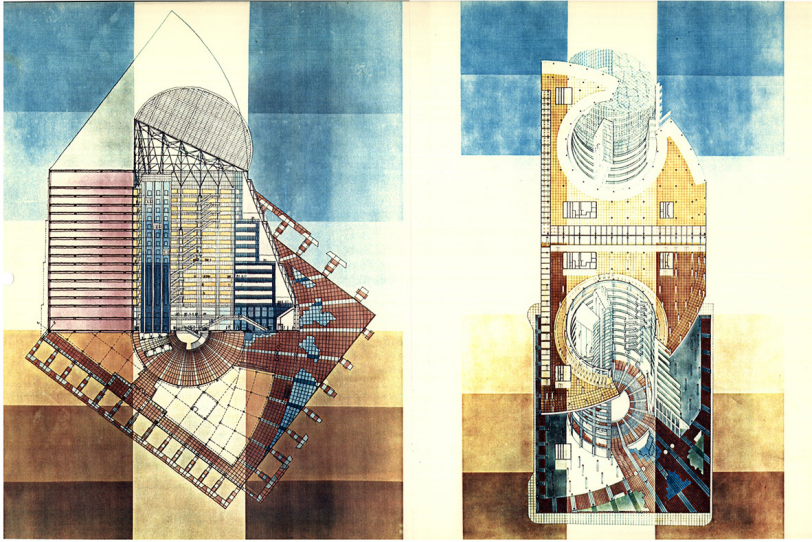
“The building’s pronounced curves and spatial excitement dispensed with the boredom of the steel-and-glass box. Instead of standing aloof from its urban surroundings, it engaged the city, linking with everything from the downtown pedway system to the CTA’s Loop elevated tracks.”

“It prized openness long before ‘transparency’ became a buzzword. The row of granite columns framed the public space along the street and enclosed the plaza...The atrium carried this public space inside the center.”

“This was all done in 1979, when this idea of making the city more accessible, a more pleasant place, wasn’t really on anybody’s mind,’ Jahn said.”

“In many ways, the design was ahead of its time.”

—Blair Kamin in “Chicago’s Thompson Center in Sad State,”
Chicago Tribune, August 14, 2014.



Courtesy of JAHN.

“It is a building of openness and accessibility, to symbolize the openness and accessibility of government as it should be conducted. The attributes of this building will serve as an inspiration that will continue Illinois’ reputation as a great state and Chicago architecture as the best in the nation.”

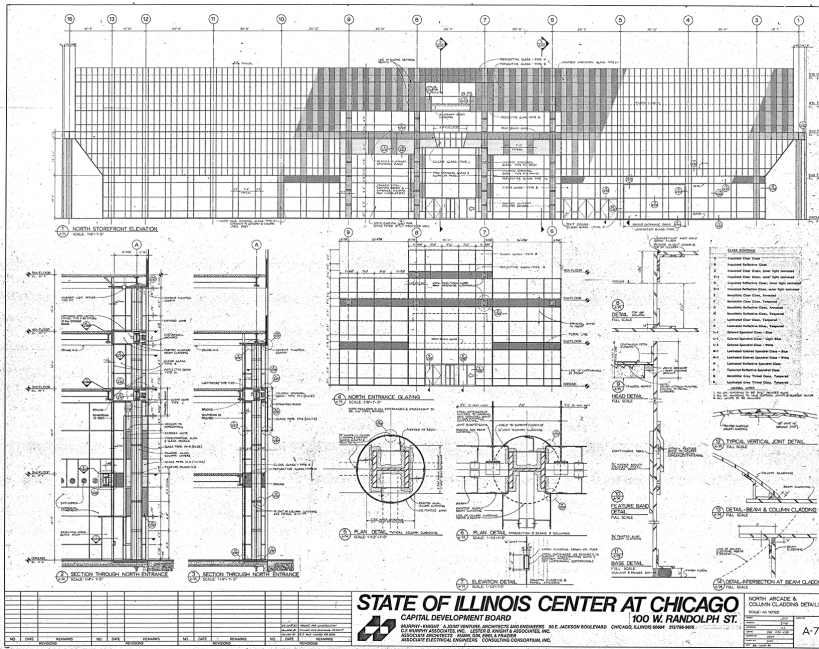
—James R. Thompson in “Background on the State of Illinois Center,” March 1985.



Courtesy of JAHN.

“And I might have wanted to change—you know, two years after it opened—the color, but today I wouldn’t change the color.”

—Helmut Jahn interviewed by Donna Robertson and Hamza Walker in “Oral History of Helmut Jahn.” Compiled under the auspices of the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, The Art Institute of Chicago, 2014.



Courtesy of JAHN.

“At one point, there are metal columns outside the stage-set columns of granite, elsewhere they reverse so that the metal is on the inside. At one point the granite hits the ground, at another it is suspended. At one side entrance the granite makes a kind of formal arch, but with a keystone of glass, as if to show that this, too, is not any more than a game.”

—Paul Goldberger in “Futuristic State Office Building Dazzles Chicago,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1985.



Courtesy of JAHN.

“Where else can you meet a friend for a cup of coffee, enjoy a light snack or a full dinner, buy a suit, fill a prescription, visit an art gallery and a state agency, renew your driver’s license, attend a concert and catch a train home—all without ever going outside?”

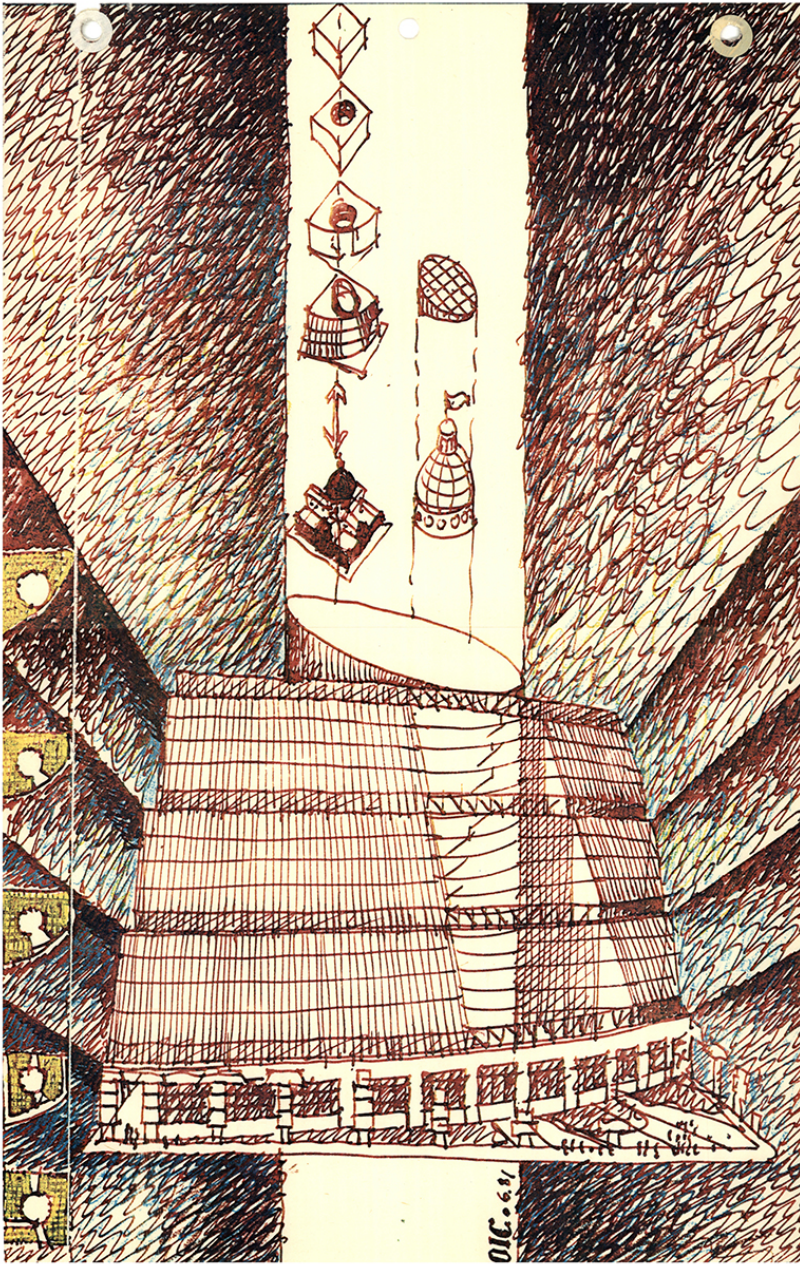
**—State of Illinois, “Background on the State of Illinois Center,”
March 1985.**



Photograph by David Schalliol, 2015.

“The atrium is still a spectacular indoor space. The food court is active. Workers and visitors launch the glassy elevators to reach the state offices in the 17-story building. There is sound. There is life.”

—Lee Bey in “Save, Don’t Raze, the Thompson Center,” *Better Government Association*, [link](#).



Courtesy of JAHN

“The good news is it’s really just a few structural beams and some glass, so it doesn’t cost that much to take down.”

—Bruce Rauner in “New draw for Architecture Biennial: See the Thompson Center before we tear it down,” *Chicago Reader*, October 13, 2015.