

Title: **Save the Century and Consumers Buildings?**

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Save the Century and Consumers Buildings?

Two vacant historic Chicago skyscrapers, the 1915 [Century Building](#) (Holabird & Roche) and the 1913 [Consumers Building](#) (Jenney, Mundie & Jensen), were targeted for demolition due to the potential threat to occupants of the neighboring [Everett M. Dirksen U.S. Courthouse](#). Senator Dick Durbin secured US\$52 million to fund the demolition. Preservationists have an alternate plan. CTBUH asks, "Should the Century and Consumers buildings be demolished?"

✓ YES

Ward Miller

Executive Director, Preservation Chicago

Located on State Street in the vibrant and thriving heart of Chicago's Loop, the 16-story Century Building and 22-story Consumers Building are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and eligible for Chicago Landmark Designation. The primary justification to demolish the pair, lodged in 2018, is no longer relevant in 2022.

The rationale was that a residential reuse requires rear windows, which present an unacceptable security risk to the courthouse, and that residential conversion is the only possible reuse; therefore, demolition is necessary.

By contrast, the proposed Chicago Collaborative Archive Center is a solid alternate that calls for all rear windows to be bricked up. It's brilliant, creative, and its stakeholders are highly motivated to proceed. The archive reuse plan enjoys strong stakeholder support from over 20 national archives and universities, broad support of Chicago elected officials, civic leaders, editorial boards of major Chicago newspapers, and a petition with over 22,750 signatures.

However, it appears that the General Services Administration (GSA), the government's landlord, would prefer to ignore this, continuing to advocate demolition. This is a private redevelopment plan that adequately addresses the security risks. The GSA's demolition-inevitability argument doesn't have a caisson to stand on.

Much more is at stake here than just the bricks and mortar. Several early Chicago skyscrapers are currently under consideration for a UNESCO World Heritage Site. If the Century and Consumers buildings were to be demolished, it would jeopardize eligibility for this extraordinary designation. Mies van der Rohe recognized and valued these tall, early, historic terra-cotta skyscrapers. It's well-known that he used the surrounding buildings to frame and contextualize his Chicago Federal Center masterpiece. Specifically, the Dirksen Courthouse's entryway on Quincy Court was dramatically framed by the Benson & Rixon and Consumers Buildings.

The GSA is solely responsible for the buildings' deteriorated condition. Prior to GSA taking ownership through eminent domain in 2005, both buildings were in reasonably good condition with many tenants. The GSA promised restoration and reuse as government offices, but allowed significant deferred maintenance, vacancy, neglect and deterioration. Demolition by neglect is prohibited by law in Chicago.

✗ NO

U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (IL)*

Designed by famed architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the courthouse has been a Loop landmark since 1964. However, the courthouse and the public servants who work there have also been targets.

Ensuring the safety of the judges and employees who work in the Dirksen Courthouse must be a top priority in light of the acute security threats they face. After an individual was charged in 2004 and convicted of attempting to destroy the courthouse with a truck bomb, the GSA

acquired four adjacent buildings to create a security buffer zone. These buildings are so close to the courthouse that from the higher floors, it is easy to see directly into judges' chambers and jury rooms.

These buildings have been vacant and unused for years, and have fallen into serious disrepair. In 2015, a block of State Street was shut down because bricks were falling from one of the buildings onto the sidewalk below. The buildings have deteriorated even further since then.

Between 2015 and 2019, the GSA considered transferring the buildings to private owners for redevelopment. However, multiple security assessments, including from the U.S. Marshals Service, ATF, FBI, Federal Protective Service and more made clear that the security risks were too great. The proposal was withdrawn.

Simply put, there has been no plan put forward for private redevelopment that has adequately addressed the security risks. That's why in 2018, the Judicial Council of the Seventh Circuit unanimously endorsed a plan to demolish the properties and create the originally intended security buffer zone. Earlier this year, I helped obtain federal funding to enable GSA to carry this out after years of working on this issue.

I respect the interest in historic preservation. But we can't risk jeopardizing safety. The Dirksen Courthouse and those who work in it have been targeted before, and security vulnerabilities around the courthouse must be addressed.

**excerpted from the Chicago Sun-Times, 26 April 2022.*