

**Title:** Debating Tall: Replace the Thompson Center?

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## Replace the Thompson Center?

Chicago's drum-shaped, 17-story James R. Thompson Center, with its soaring atrium and extensive glazing, has been criticized for poor temperature control and spatial inefficiency, and maintenance has been deferred. The State of Illinois has proposed selling the building to a private developer to make up budget shortfalls. Plans for a 518-meter replacement tower have been floated. The question is, "Should the James R. Thompson Center be demolished and replaced?"

### NO

**Helmut Jahn**, *Founder, JAHN,*  
*Architect for the original project*

The original vision of Governor Jim Thompson and our firm was to make the building, which opened in 1984, a symbol for the openness and transparency of the state government, and an active urban center in the city. Subsequent administrations have not maintained the building, and its retail lacks style and attraction.

The best way to save the building, and to improve it, is to re-purpose it. This requires upgrades to the retail and food service, marketing the large floor plates to innovative tech companies, and adding parking. For the unused FAR, adding 24-hour uses, such as a hotel, apartments or condominiums, would enliven the building with around-the-clock activity.

We further advocate maximizing the floor-area ratio (FAR). In the current building, there is approximately 148,643 square meters of unused FAR that can be utilized for further development of the site. The southeast corner is the best location for new development, as it would mean minimal impact to the building's significant spaces and primary building services.

This would consist of a new tower, with a footprint of approximately 1,208 square meters to be developed on the southeast corner, with hotel uses on the lower floors and residential uses on the upper floors. The ground floor would incorporate the hotel entrance, and the residential lobby would be located along LaSalle Street. The remainder of the ground-floor spaces

would have retail uses. Level 2 would contain the hotel lobby and food and beverage uses. Meeting facilities would be incorporated on levels 3 and 4. The remainder of the existing building would be utilized as office space.

To enhance public space, the ground floor would be opened up at the plaza entrance and at the LaSalle and Lake Street entrances. This, of course would mean that the usable spaces fronting the atrium corridors would need to be fully glazed. Through vents in the atrium skylight, natural convection would temper this space and promote 24-hour use.

Architectural history is full of examples where such re-purposing has brought new life to structures like this. The only way the building can not only survive, but become a landmark for the 21st century, is if some changes are made.

### YES

**Mir Ali**, *Professor Emeritus of Architecture,*  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

The Home Insurance Building in Chicago, built in 1884, known as the first metal framed skyscraper of the world, was demolished in 1931. The Singer Building in New York, built in 1908, the tallest building

of the world for some time, was demolished in 1968. There are other noteworthy buildings that have suffered or are waiting for the same fate in the United States and elsewhere for various reasons.

A case in point is the Thompson Center in Chicago. Despite its iconic form and post-modern style, its mammoth atrium has experienced acoustic and climate control problems. Some of these functional problems were resolved earlier, but the building has become a source of recurrent maintenance and excessive expenses. Now, the State of Illinois is considering to sell it, to partly mitigate its budget deficit. Jahn has advocated an idea of preserving the Thompson Center with some modifications and the building of a 110-story tower on the site. Certainly, the proposal is a viable option, and warrants consideration.

A preferable option, however, is to demolish the existing building and use the entire site, freed from congestion, to construct a supertall building, as this would represent the site's maximal use. The great transit-oriented location in Chicago's downtown Loop, a hub of activity, is ideal for such a building. It can have a large open area around it that can be used for a public space, and an attractive plaza at the ground plane that responds to the busy street life. A state-of-the-art skyscraper will be amenable to design flexibility and the application of technological innovations and energy-saving advances that did not exist in 1984, leading to its superior performance. It could effectively respond to the place and its context, regenerate the neighborhood, and import another spectacular skyscraper to Chicago, as its tallest.

