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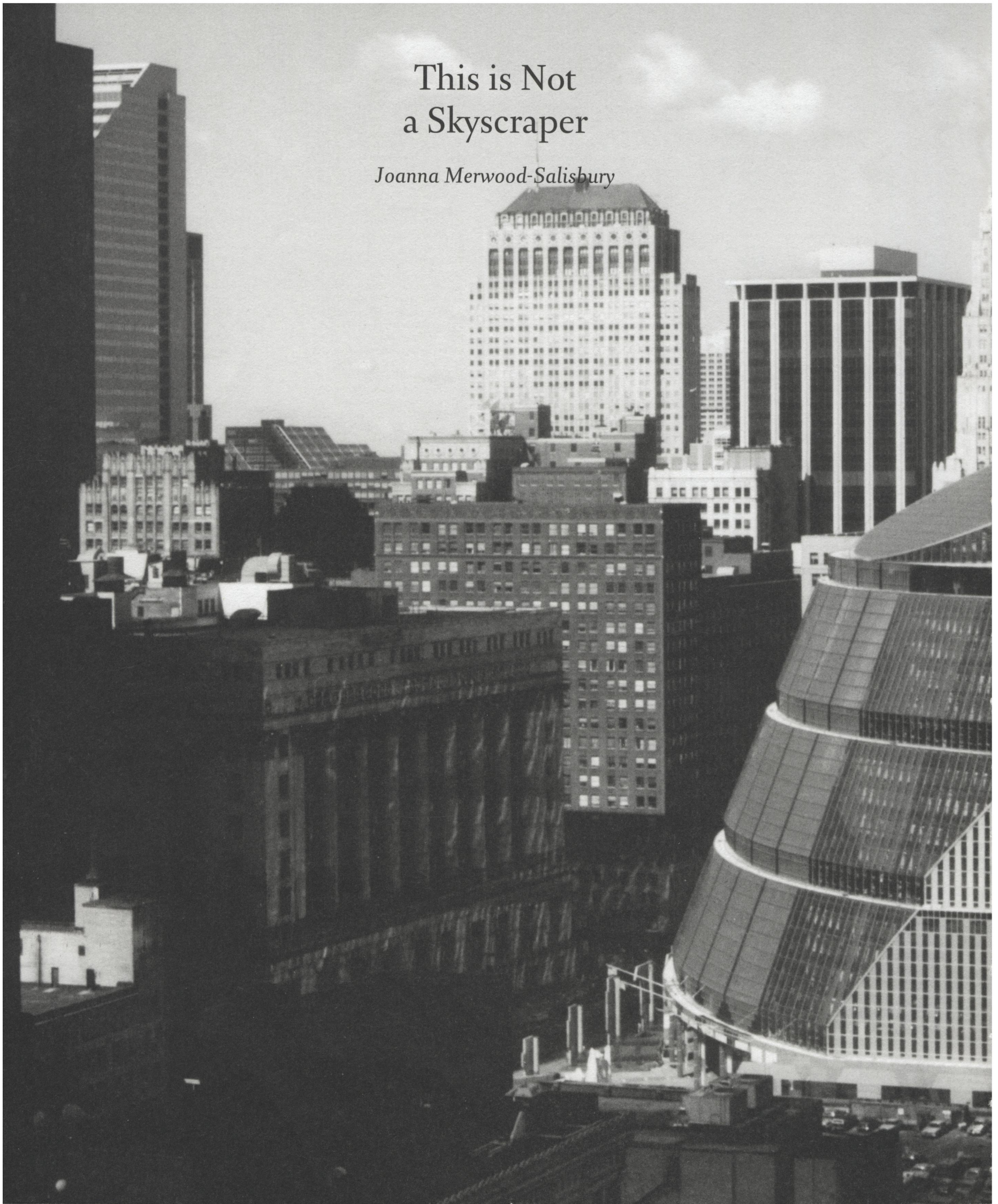
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# This is Not a Skyscraper

*Joanna Merwood-Salisbury*









In 1967 the pop artist Claes Oldenburg sketched a new addition to his series of imaginary civic monuments featuring grossly oversized everyday objects. After his giant electric Fan in the Place of the Statue of Liberty, and King Kong-sized Ironing Board for the Lower East Side, he proposed a Late Submission to the Chicago Tribune Architectural Competition of 1922 in the form of a gargantuan clothespin. 'Perceiving in it [the clothespin] a certain gothic character, I visualised it as a substitute for the Chicago Tribune Tower on Michigan Avenue', Oldenburg explained.<sup>1</sup>

A decade or so later, Oldenburg's idea of an extended competition deadline was picked up by a group of architects known as the Chicago Seven – Thomas Beeby, Laurence Booth, Stuart E Cohen, James Ingo Freed, James Nagle, Stanley Tigerman and Ben Weese. Taking their name from an exhibition held at the Richard Gray Gallery in 1976, the Chicago Seven were iconoclasts, using their annual exhibition to challenge the orthodox view that the modern style was the city's birthright and obligation. Crediting Oldenburg only glancingly, Weese proposed to revisit the Tribune Tower competition for the group's fourth show in 1979. The possibility of appropriating classic architectural icons and producing new ones appealed to their teasing sensibility. Now titled 'Late Entries to the Chicago Tribune Competition of 1922', the exhibition was expanded to include international architects at the suggestion of the gallery owner Rhona Hoffman. As imagined by Cohen and Tigerman, it was not a competition to replace the Chicago Tribune Tower (the celebrated building was manifestly not under threat), but a collective game. And like all good games, the rules were simple. Participants were to submit drawings in a strict format, 5ft × 3ft perspectives seen from the same low viewpoint specified in 1922. On 30 May 1980 an exhibition of 54 drawings opened at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, accompanied by a two-volume catalogue documenting both the original and contemporary submissions.<sup>2</sup>

Referencing a prominent episode in the history of architectural modernism, the 'Late Entries' exhibition was suggestive not only because it focused on the skyscraper, a typology Chicago claimed as its own, but also because it marked a moment when architecture lacked a singular stylistic direction, just as it had in the early 1920s. As Charles Jencks proclaimed in 1977, architectural modernism was history, its potential for innovation stifled by endless repetition.<sup>3</sup> But in its ubiquity, modern architecture could also find a new beginning. If the city was a living museum of architecture, it was open to exhumation and cannibalisation. And so, just as Piranesi had disinterred Rome, the 'Late Entries' exhibition was a form of creative urban archaeology, unearthing Chicago's diverse past and in the process overturning the myth of heroic Miesian dominance. It should also be made clear that this desire was not Oedipal. Rather than rejecting Chicago's modernist history, it attempted to recognise a broader spectrum of forebears – as Tigerman put it, to move beyond the simple divide between good guys (the followers of the European avant-garde) and bad guys (those working in more populist styles adapted from the beaux-arts and the art deco moderne).

As Cohen noted in his introduction to the catalogue, with the usual aesthetic judgement suspended, variety was the point. Mining architecture's back catalogue, participants treated history as a grab bag of ideas and images to

## Helmut Jahn's Late, Late Entry to the Chicago Tribune Tower Competition

be borrowed from, or consumed, at will. Though the majority focused on the tower as an object and symbol, a rationalised urbanism was implied through their organisation within the grid. Multiplying Oldenburg's original, the drawings were arranged as an imaginary streetscape made up of individual

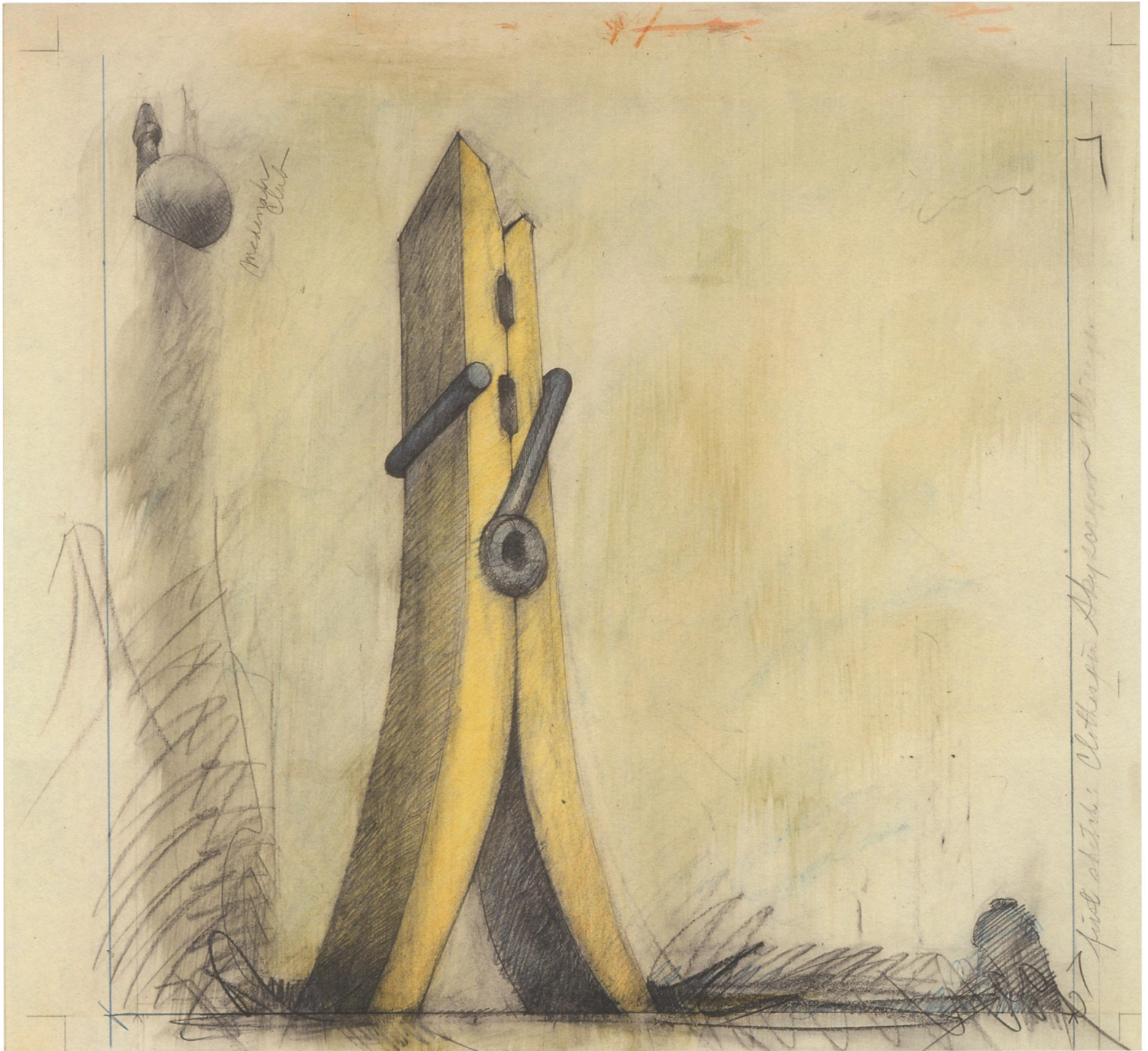
character-buildings sitting side by side in a sort of architectural board game. A number of participants, including Frank Gehry, who submitted one of his signature sketches, treated the project casually. Cohen wryly observed that some had not taken the challenge 'seriously enough', while others, including those who declined the invitation to participate – Aldo Rossi, Rob Krier and Moshe Safdie, among them – had perhaps taken it too seriously. Few entries had the visual punch of Oldenburg's original. Only one, by Florida-based architects Arquitectonica, made a direct reference to his clothespin, although strangely it was diminished in size, reduced to an ornament adorning a constructivist architectural framework. More effective as pop architecture was Livesey & Rosenstein's giant pink Evenflo baby's bottle, a critique of what the authors called the 'infantile' tendency in contemporary skyscraper design. Picking up the crypto-feminist theme and making it explicit, a small number of entries made play with the phallic nature of Adolf Loos's iconic doric column; an anonymous entry from Japan shrouded it in a giant condom, denying its ability to reproduce, while Susana Torre castrated the Loos tower altogether, leaving behind only an empty pedestal. In this sense, though influenced by Oldenburg's pop sensibility, most participants took their source material not from the supermarket but from Chicago itself – a moribund skyscraper city now remade as a sort of Delirious Chicago. For Cohen, it followed that the measure of the exhibition's success was in its tautology, reinstating architecture 'as the subject matter of architecture'.<sup>4</sup>

What is interesting about this perceived success was that even in Chicago – the natural habitat of the architect as builder – the 'Late Entries' exhibition exposed a turn to the figurative and narrative potential of drawing and collage as a way to vent a frustration with the restrictions of practice.<sup>5</sup> Almost more than buildings, drawings in the 1970s and early 1980s were regarded as the principal object of architectural production, a means not just of resisting the crushing global economic depression but of reaffirming the potential of architectural creation, reviving the concept of style as a legitimate area of exploration. Taking their lead from European architects such as James Stirling and Aldo Rossi, the participants all explored the long history of the drawing within the discipline, recovering traditional methods of representation such as watercolour and pastel, rediscovering the pleasures of the decorative and the ornamental, and reaffirming the drawing as a rhetorical device. In this way, the drawing became less a technical medium and more the presentation of an identity, a calling card, a fingerprint indicative of a particular personal style.

This renewed interest in the autonomy of the architectural drawing and the question of style was especially provocative in the context of Chicago. Perhaps more than any other city, Chicago privileged the built artefact and discouraged the celebration of individual authorship, except in a very few special cases. Describing the way in which Chicago architecture has been mythologised, architectural historian David Van Zanten has written: 'It is pictured idealistically as a common enterprise marked

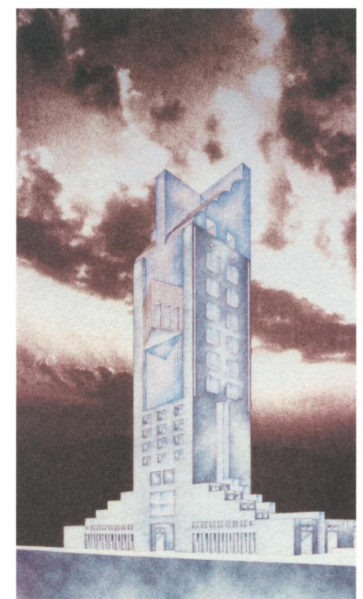
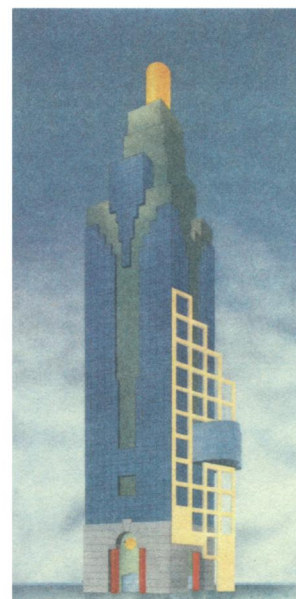
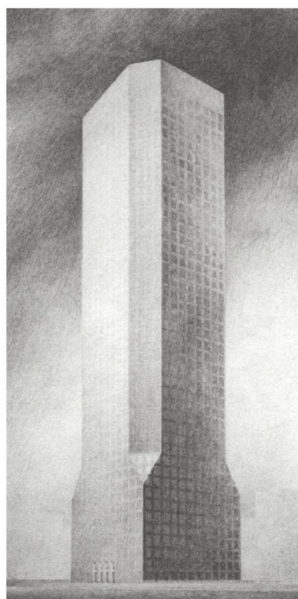
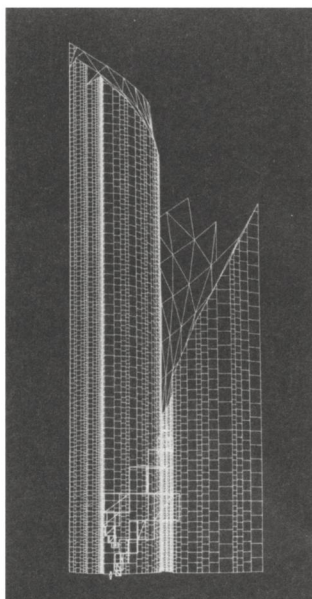
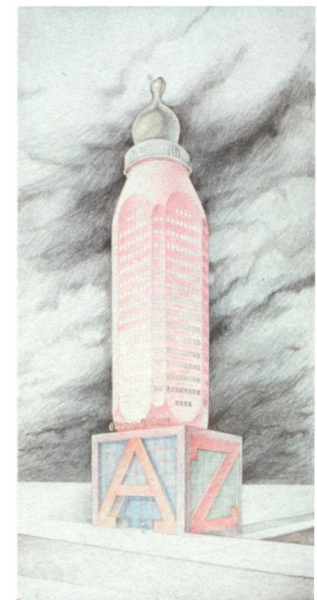
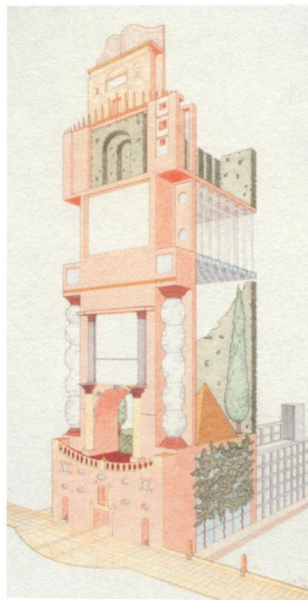
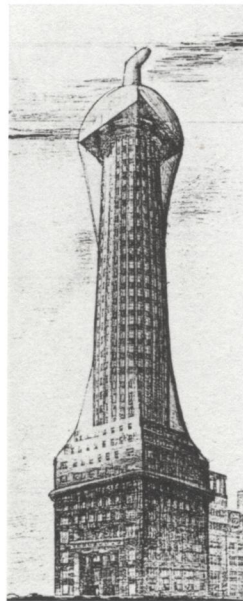
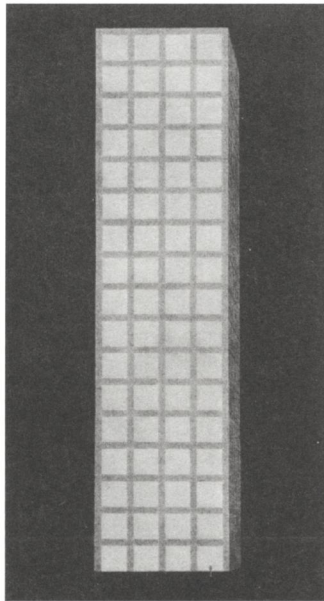
*Previous:* Helmut Jahn, with C F Murphy Associates and Lester B Knight & Associates, State of Illinois Centre, Chicago, 1986  
Photograph James Steinkamp  
© Jahn





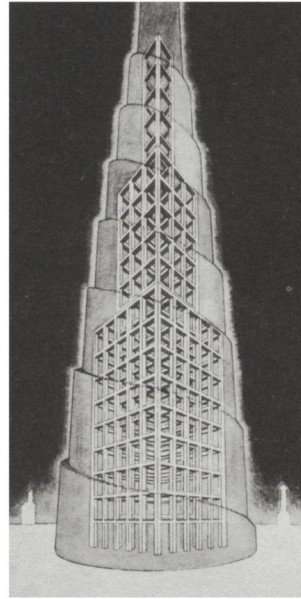
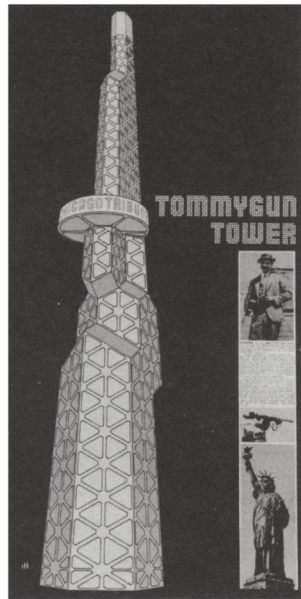
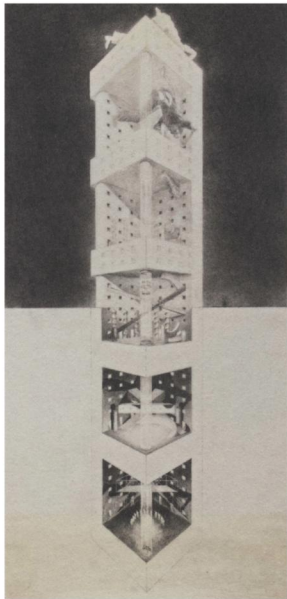
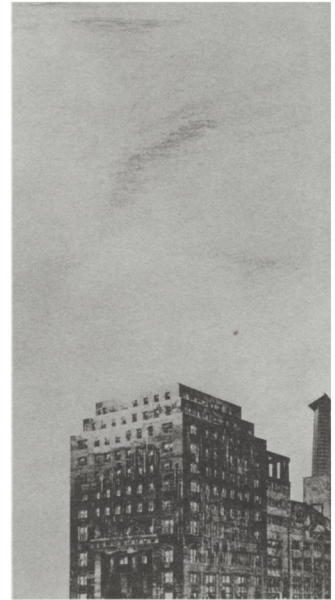
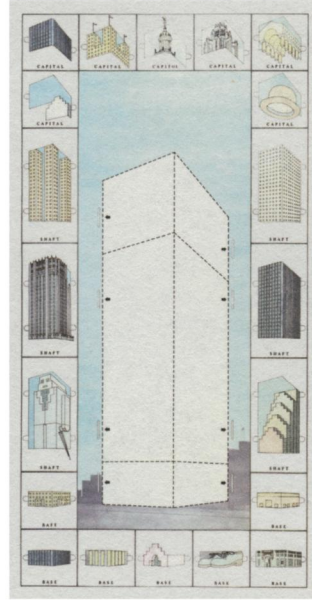
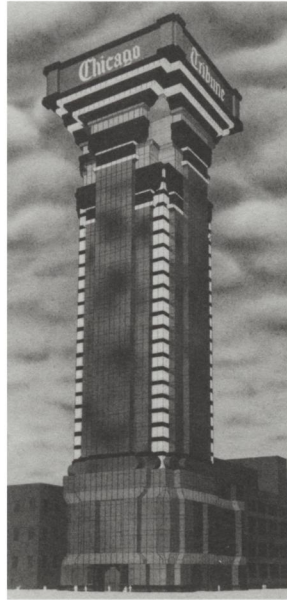
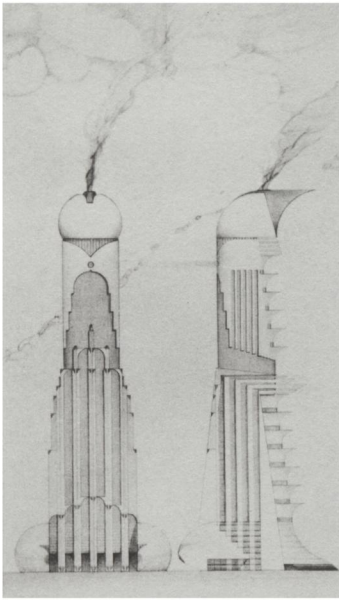
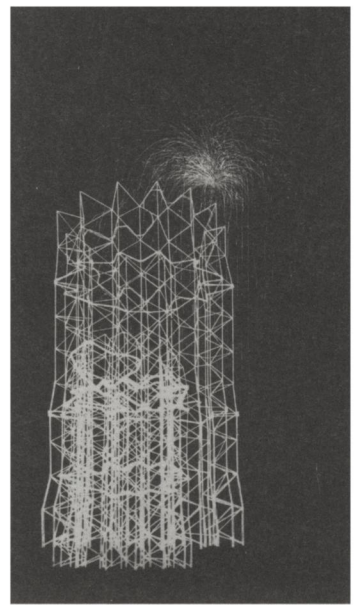
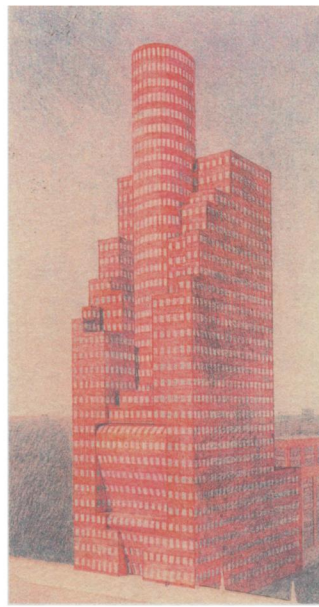
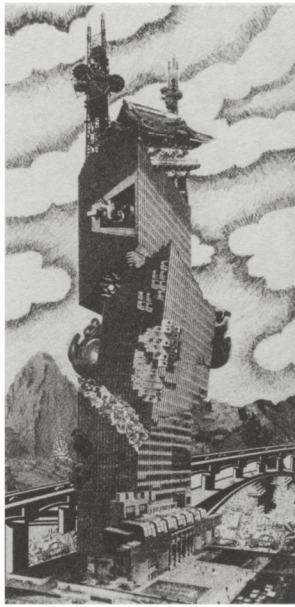
Claes Oldenburg, *Late Submission to the  
Chicago Tribune Architectural Competition of 1922*  
- Clothespin, Version One, 1967  
© The Menil Collection, Houston,  
bequest of David Whitney





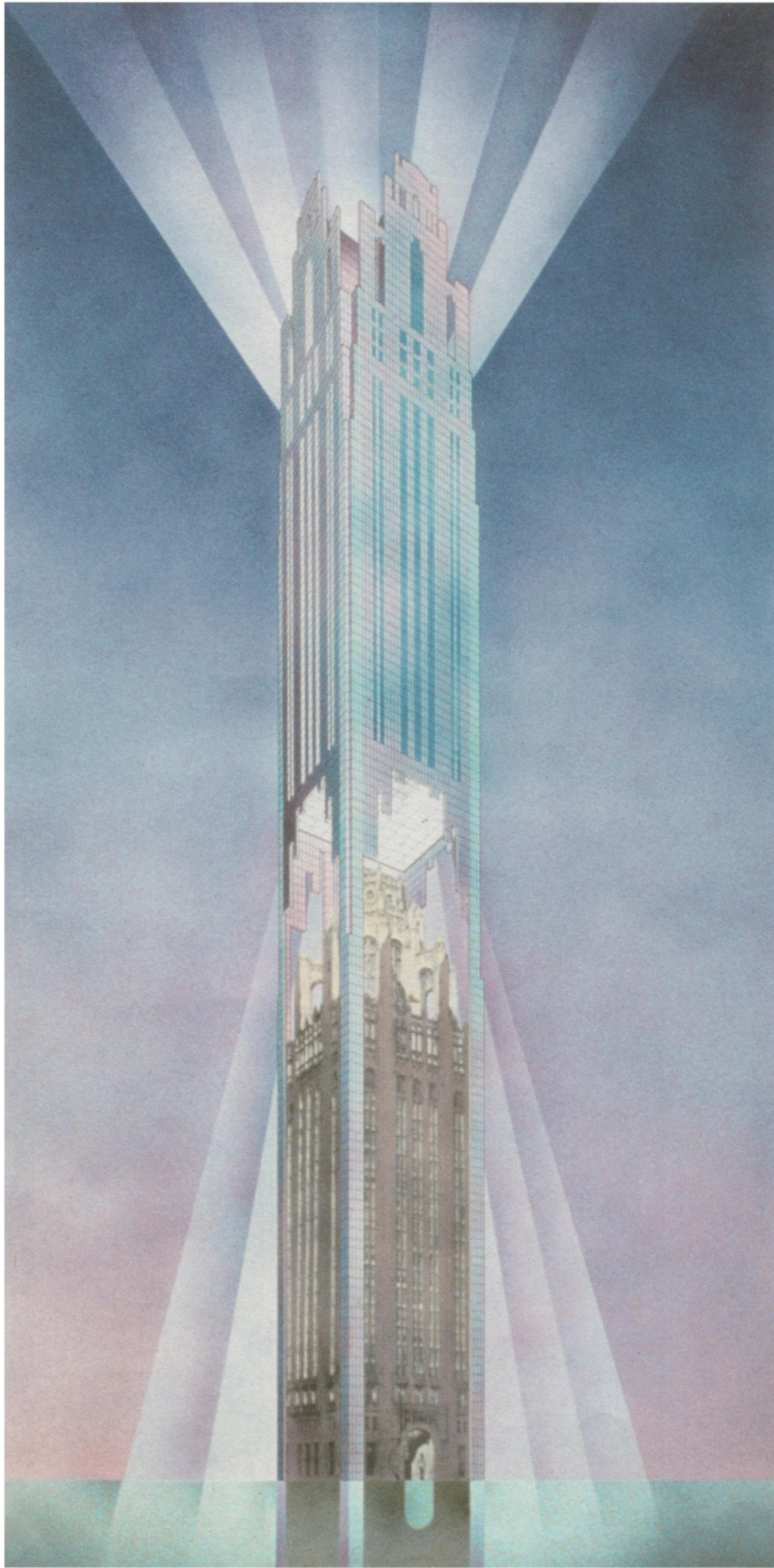
Late Entries to the Chicago Tribune Architectural Competition of 1922, 1980  
 Ando; Anonymous; Arquitectonica; Beeby; DiMaio; Doyle; Haag; Livesey, Rosenstein;  
 Netsch; Pelli (courtesy the architect), Pran; Rannali (courtesy the architect)





Ross; Schwartz; Silveti (courtesy the architect); Alison & Peter Smithson (© Frances Loeb Library, Harvard GSD); Sorkin (courtesy the architect); Stern; Taft (courtesy the architect); Torre (courtesy the architect); Tschumi (courtesy the architect); Tupker; Vinciarelli, Armstrong, Fodera, Kalla, Plunz; Woods  
All images © Art Institute of Chicago, except where noted







simultaneously by order and genius. Remarkable individual artists like Sullivan, Wright and Mies are seen as contributors to a broader architectural tradition known since 1941 as the Chicago School.<sup>6</sup> In this narrative, modern American architecture began with the 'commercial style' established in the 1880s, a period in which individual genius gave unique form to a typology born out of strict economic imperatives. Rising out of the grid, the skyscraper and the city fused into one, as differently scaled elements of the same ordering device. What nineteenth-century critics had seen as a chaotic nightmare was transformed, under the strict order imposed by rationalisation, into an ideal urban vision. In Chicago, following Daniel Burnham's corporatisation of architectural practice and Mies's rationalisation of the skyscraper form, the individual architect was accordingly subsumed into a collective enterprise. Twentieth-century Chicago could therefore be seen as the birthplace and crucible of modern architecture in the US, as well as its necropolis.

Within the dynamics of the Chicago Seven, accounts such as these were the preserve of Tigerman, the city's self-appointed resident genealogist, tirelessly surveying branches of its architectural family tree and producing ever more intricate diagrams of association.<sup>7</sup> Compelled by this organising impulse, he even categorised his own endeavours, classifying the eclectic 'Late Entries' into eight different types, running the gamut from 'alienating grids' in the so-called late modernist style to 'unbuildable art pieces' in the manner of Oldenburg. Some participants, he noted, took a historicist approach, referencing alternative modernist styles including the neoclassical or setback art deco to little memorable effect. More creatively, others manifested a range of references through formal or literal collage. A few (including Thomas Beeby's tower wrapped in the Stars and Stripes – an uncomfortable premonition of the jingoistic symbolism of 1,776-foot-tall One World Trade Centre in New York) used populist, easily understood imagery. Prefiguring the deconstructivist movement soon to come, another group literally undermined the heroic tradition, bending, breaking or even melting the iconic figure of the modernist tower. One particularly forward-looking entry anticipated the digital preoccupations of the late twentieth century: Walter Netsch's field-theory butterfly tower was created using a PDP-11 minicomputer. Ranging from the irreverent and provocative to the earnest and pragmatic, these drawings reveal architects revelling in the freedom to play with style.

### *The Eighth Man*

Strangely, out of this great variety of approaches, only one drawing referenced the Chicago Tribune Tower as it was actually built. In a demonstration of fantastic literalness, or an apparent lack of imagination bordering on genius, Helmut Jahn's entry has a shining glass replica hovering directly above the existing building. Even the graphic technique is deadpan – the heroic building-lantern emanates light in the exact same manner as a Raymond Hood drawing. Referencing modern architecture's infinite imageability, this truly is a skyscraper as 'auto-monument', in that it monumentalises only itself. As a young German working in the prestigious Chicago office of Charles F Murphy and Associates, Jahn had a close association with the Chicago Seven. While he was not included in the original 1976 exhibition that gave the group its name, he became a regular collaborator soon afterwards, so much so that he has been described as 'the eighth member of the Chicago Seven'.

Helmut Jahn, Late Entry to the  
Chicago Tribune Architectural  
Competition of 1922, 1980  
© Jahn

As Cohen remembered, Ben Weese proposed the 'Late Entries' exhibition with Jahn in mind: 'Hey guys, let's redo the Tribune Tower competition and give Helmut a chance.'<sup>8</sup>

Helmut took his chance and ran with it. One of the few exhibitors who would go on to become a celebrated skyscraper architect in his own right, he took the magpie attitude to history and the formal and visual cues that characterised the exhibition and used them as the basis for a successful career. During the building boom of the early 1980s, as financial deregulation freed up money for real-estate development, he became the designer of choice for new commercial towers in Chicago and across the country. His European accent, leather trousers and green Porsche Carrera only added to his man-of-the-moment appeal.

In the spirit of Tigerman's genealogies, the series of prominent skyscrapers Jahn built in this period can be seen as variations on two basic themes: sleek containers given a clear visual identity through their sculptural form, breaking with the platonic tradition of modernism by featuring faceted or curved facades; and towers that reference some kind of abstracted historic architectural imagery, either in their profile or in a motif etched onto the curtain wall. Drawing on the contemporaneous work of César Pelli, Norman Foster and Hans Hollein, the first category includes projects such as the Xerox Centre in Chicago (1980) and 701 Fourth Avenue South in Minneapolis (1984). The second includes not only One South Wacker (1982), which features coloured glass panels suggestive of indented arches, but also an addition to the Chicago Board of Trade (1982) and the Northwestern Terminal building (1987), both art deco pastiches with stepped-back profiles. On Jahn's drawing board in 1985, and the last hurrah of the building boom which ended on Black Monday, 19 October 1987, was a mega-tower to be built over the Hudson River railyards in New York City for real-estate developer Donald Trump. Typically Trumpian in its proportions, 'Television City' was meant to replace Rockefeller Centre as headquarters of NBC, and at 150 storeys it would have been the tallest building in the world, higher than the World Trade Centre or the Sears Tower.<sup>9</sup>

But before Jahn scaled these heights and depths, he was living something of a double life, playing two versions of the figure of the contemporary architect. On the one hand he was a newly anointed design partner at Charles F Murphy & Associates, a member of the sixth generation of great Chicago offices, about to become the heroic skyscraper builder. On the other, he was a satellite orbiting the Chicago Seven, a graphic architect rejecting the certainty of the built object. One project above all others exemplifies this dual identity.

In February 1981 *Progressive Architecture* published a series of images by Jahn in the vibrant graphic style popularised over the previous decade by Stirling, Rossi and Ungers.<sup>10</sup> Illustrating his proposal for the State of Illinois Centre (now known as the James R Thompson Centre), these drawings were intended for an audience of architects rather than a client. Hand drawn using red ink on graph paper, with a background hatched in coloured pencil, they show a squat office building with an unusual curved facade and an enormous conical atrium. Playing with systems of representation, the drawings combine multiple projections including bird's- and worm's-eye views along with plans and a folded out elevation depicting a neoclassical arcade. In the beaux-arts tradition, they attempt to show the totality of a building on a single sheet of paper, while at the same time never presenting its finite image for



visual consumption. Rather than the objectivity of the axonometric, the technical virtuosity of the composite drawing is the true goal. There is no context beyond a flat backdrop on which blue-hatched bands represent the sky, and brown/red-hatched bands the earth. The building is not whole but an autonomous fractured object, sitting in virtual coloured ether. Characterised by bands of gradated colour, the drawings refer to a sedimentary archaeology. Referencing earlier forms of architectural drawing, reviving the concepts of style and ornament, Jahn was reaching deep into history.

Safely cocooned in the Ungers-built Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt, Jahn's drawings are today cherished as contemporary classics, valuable artefacts in the history of the discipline, widely understood as marking a decisive turning point in its direction. They might be prized even more if the problematic building they depict had never been constructed. For, despite early praise, the State of Illinois Centre has never been one of Chicago's more loved buildings. Characterised at best as a bold but unsuccessful experiment, and at worst as an expensive, grandiose folly, it is currently under threat of demolition. Short and squat where his late entry to the Chicago Tribune Tower competition was tall and thin, a tower twice over, Jahn's State of Illinois Centre is a late, late entry to the long lineage of commercial architecture in Chicago, recalling an era when the office building was characterised by volume rather than height, as famously exemplified by Burnham and Root's Rookery building of 1888. Along with its polychromy, ornamental references and interior focus, this simple lack of verticality was to become a major point of critical debate. Seen in the same Freudian terms as Susana Torre's reference to Loos, the building was clearly underendowed, a mere podium for an absent tower.

#### *Reproducing the City*

As with all renderings, Jahn's colourful presentation drawings were a form of post-rationalisation, a selling point for a project made several years before. And, again belatedly, they tapped into another long-running Chicago tradition: the public building intended as a catalyst for the revival of a grey and depressed part of the city. Situated just south of the main branch of the Chicago River, the State of Illinois building was in the North Loop, an area that had been in decline for 50 years.<sup>11</sup> With the supply of office and commercial space outstripping demand, the owners of half-empty buildings let their properties fall into disrepair. Unable to pay their taxes, some opted for demolition, leasing out the vacant lots for car parking. After dark the streets were sparsely populated as the district's late-nineteenth-century theatres lost the battle with movies and television. The most prominent local institution was the once prestigious Sherman House Hotel, which had operated from a series of buildings on the northwest corner of North Clark and West Randolph Streets since the 1840s. Conveniently located for the City and County Building across the street, it had been a favourite of gangsters and politicians who used its restaurant, the College Inn, as a place to broker the informal deals that kept the city in motion. But like many of its neighbours, the Sherman had fallen on hard times. The hotel closed in 1973 and its last remnant, a 1920s block, was demolished by order of the city in 1980. With this historic building gone, the entire city block bordered by Clark, Randolph, LaSalle and Lake Streets was ripe for development.

Chicago had been pursuing a vigorous agenda of urban redevelopment since 1955, when the city's powerful and long-serving mayor,

Richard J Daley, first took office. In the postwar period the city's urban and economic landscape suffered a seismic shift. As global capitalism began to engulf local economies, the industries that had made the Midwest prosperous in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (most notably steel) relocated. The business service sector, increasingly the mainstay of the American economy, was as yet under-developed here. The result for Chicago, and for the Loop in particular, was devastating. As production industries departed and wealth left the region, demand for downtown office space declined – the last high-rise office block had been constructed in the early 1930s. By the postwar period the main branch of the Chicago River, once an important traffic artery joining east and west, had become an agent of separation: as the area north of the river became wealthier and whiter, the Loop to the south became poorer and blacker.

From his election until he died in office in 1976, Daley refused to accept this pattern of urban realignment. Radically remaking the political mechanisms of city-building, he focused on shoring up the historic core of downtown Chicago as the economic powerhouse of the Midwest, a place where business thrived and architecture mattered.<sup>12</sup> Bypassing the ward system, he worked directly with real-estate investors on massive renewal projects using the extraordinary power of what is known as the Chicago 'growth machine'. A uniquely American system of party politics, this machine involved government agency on a mammoth scale, productive of massive infrastructural, urban and architectural projects, all thoroughly and inextricably interwoven with the agendas of private interests.

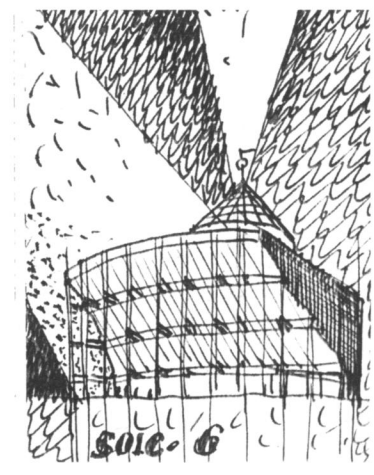
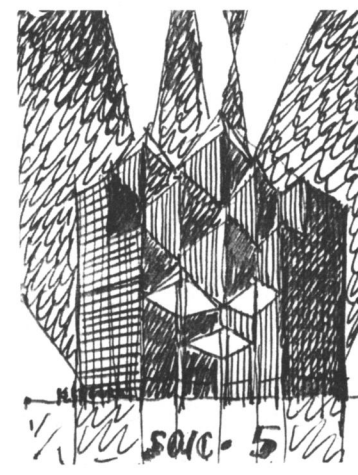
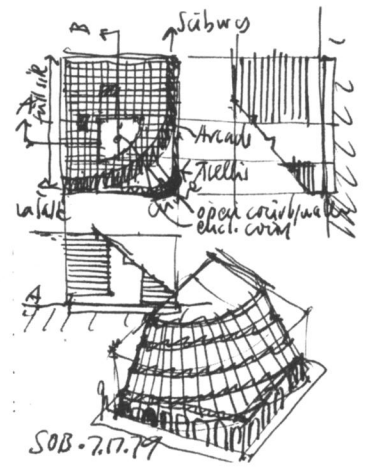
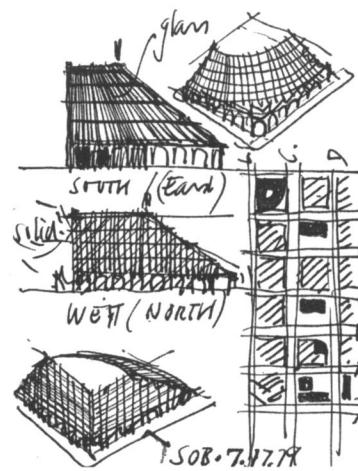
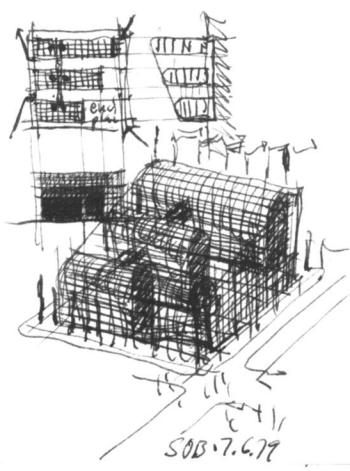
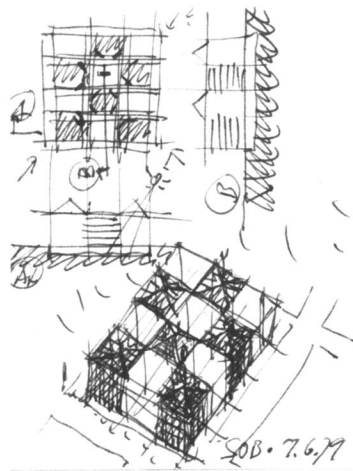
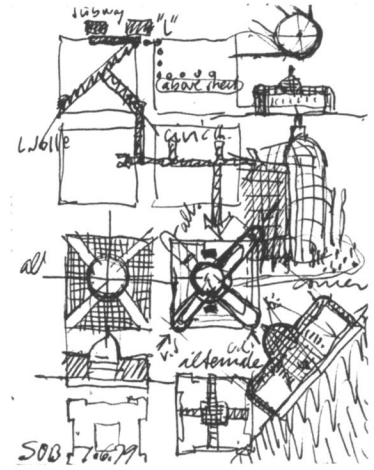
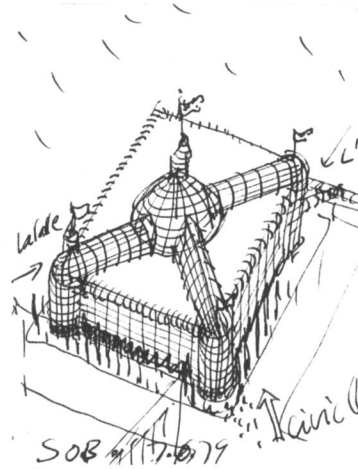
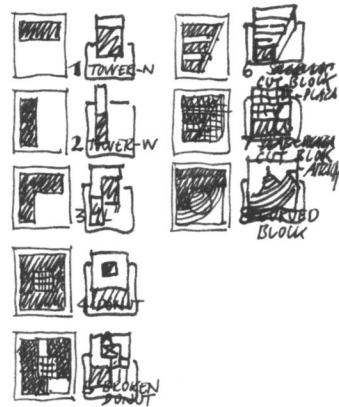
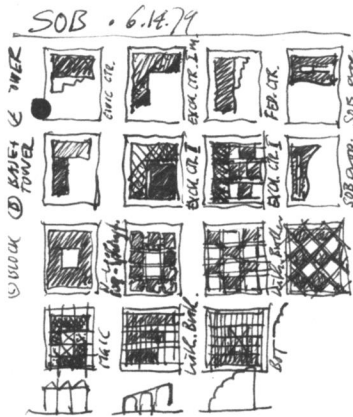
Paradoxically, Daley focused on the construction of new skyscrapers to attract the flow of capital: the appearance of tall towers would invite further investment, he believed. Though the skyscraper is often described as the built form of capitalism, this ceased to be the case soon after its invention. While formally fluid and able to be filled with any programme, the type could not adapt to the flow of capital across cities and regions. Being fixed in its place, it is a poor materialisation of capital, as demonstrated by the fact that so many of the first skyscrapers were obsolete by the early 1930s. For much of the twentieth century the skyscraper has in fact not been the pure product of capitalism, but has served more as a kind of talisman, the expression or symbol of its triumph. This was certainly the case for Chicago in the postwar era. No longer the strong centre of a national economy, the city had to reinvent itself to remain relevant in the age of globalism and post-industrialisation.

Unlike his contemporary in New York City, Commissioner Robert Moses, Daley did not hold architects in contempt. Arguably the most significant patron of architecture in the city, he commissioned and supported the construction of buildings throughout his long tenure, favouring the Miesian style as the one best suited to public buildings and corporate architecture.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the series of high-profile public buildings he championed along the Dearborn Corridor introduced a new urban model. Once the city's main business artery, Dearborn had been in decline since the early twentieth century. In order to restore its former prestige and to stimulate private development, Daley commissioned the Civic Centre building (later known as the Daley Centre) on Randolph Street between Dearborn and Clark. Completed in 1965, this building became an immediate icon. A prismatic tower sitting alone on a large plaza set back

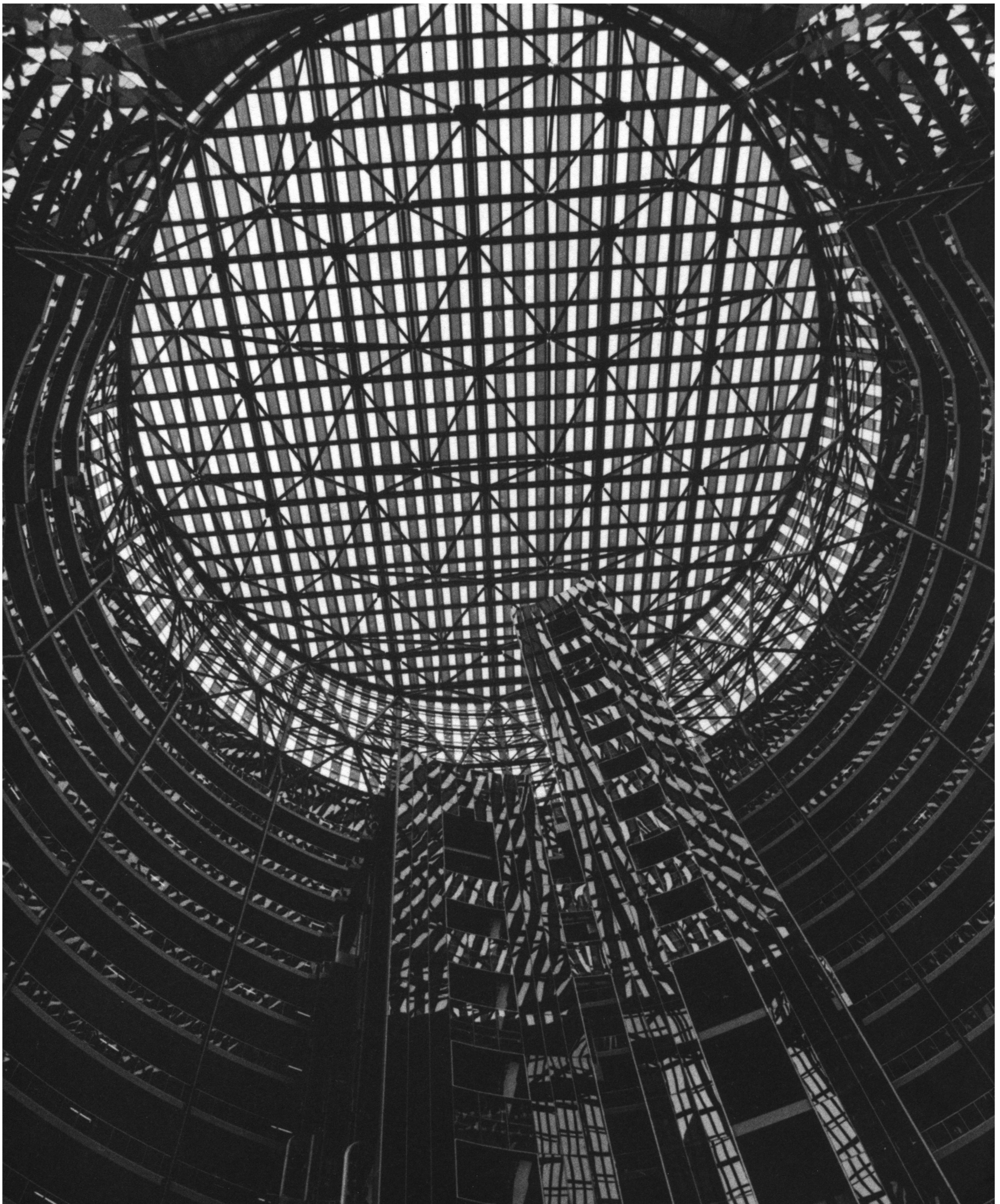
from the street, it could hardly be more different from the beaux-arts City and County building next door. Its only concession to decoration

Helmut Jahn, sketches,  
State of Illinois Centre, Chicago, 1979  
© Jahn











was its Cor-Ten steel-clad facade, designed to oxidise to a rich red-brown colour. At the same time Daley was instrumental in getting the Federal Centre built slightly further south (1959–75). The complex is made up of two Miesian towers containing a courthouse and federal offices, and a pavilion-like Federal post office. Again the buildings were sited on an open plaza. As Daley had hoped, the aesthetic style and urban model these buildings introduced was soon picked up by a number of private developments.

Barring the ever present Mies, these buildings were associated not with individual architects but with large firms. The consummate politician, Daley made sure the work was spread around, and that all voting constituencies were part of the process. As Ross Miller notes, the Civic Centre was designed by the Irish firm of Naess & Murphy, with Skidmore Owings & Merrill (the firm associated with the Protestant elite) contributing engineering services, and the Jewish firm of Loeb, Schlossman Bennett also given work to do.<sup>14</sup> In the case of the Federal Centre, the chief architect was Mies himself, working with Daley's favoured Charles Murphy (now the leading partner of C F Murphy Associates) along with A Epstein & Sons, and Schmidt, Garden & Erikson. This way of working was typical in post-war Chicago. As John Zukowsky has noted, 'conglomerates of various partners with design, engineering and client contact specialties flourished after the Great Depression and the Second World War'.<sup>15</sup> Following the corporate model established by Daniel Burnham in the 1890s, they also spread responsibility around large teams, each with a particular kind of expertise. This approach suited the understanding of architectural projects as large-scale technical problems requiring minute and complex specialisation, and it had the further benefit of easing the transfer of knowledge through the generations. In 1993 Tigerman mapped a family tree showing how all these large firms were interconnected, with junior members moving on to become senior ones.<sup>16</sup> All those involved in this genealogical line adapted and explored earlier architectural forms, giving rise to a style that was distinctive, yet had no single author. In this way Chicago could be seen as a self-producing architecture machine, the product not of individuals but of the city itself.

With the South Loop and Dearborn corridor renewal underway, the North Loop was the final component of Daley's plan. In 1973 Chicago's Department of Urban Renewal prepared a preliminary study of the North Loop, guided by the Chicago 21 plan released that year. While holding to the same basic imperatives as earlier city-planning documents, this plan introduced a subtle refinement, a new attitude towards the provision of public space. Two years later, with the support of local businesses, the City Council approved what it called the 'North Loop Redevelopment Area'.<sup>17</sup> A Commercial District Development Commission was authorised to take charge of the project, and given the power of eminent domain, allowing it to expropriate land and properties the city had declared 'blighted'. But beyond identifying the blocks up for redevelopment, the city offered little in the way of a masterplan.<sup>18</sup> When Daley died in 1976, real-estate developer Arthur Rubloff was left as the main orchestrator of the project. And despite growing criticism of the destructive methods of urban renewal, especially from the emerging historic preservation movement, Rubloff was eager to press ahead: in 1978 he proposed the demolition of much of the area and the construction of a large hotel and convention centre on a site along Wacker Drive. When that fell through he sought a new partner and found one in the state government.

James R 'Big Jim' Thompson, a Republican, was elected Governor of Illinois in 1977. Like Mayor Daley, he ran his political operation as a personal endeavour. Elected on a reformist platform at a time of deep economic recession, Thompson tried to revive the moribund local economy, investing large sums in buildings and infrastructure across the state.<sup>19</sup> When it came to Chicago, Thompson held significantly less economic and political power than Daley, but he did have one important card to play: a new building where all state employees in the city could be housed together.<sup>20</sup> The state's Capital Development Board (CDB) had begun planning for such a building in 1975, around the same time that the renewal of the North Loop was becoming an important topic. Besides providing office space, the State of Illinois Centre was to feature public spaces for cultural, recreational and social activities. Its form was to 'have a strong and positive identity relative to its surroundings'.<sup>21</sup> Under Thompson's leadership it therefore assumed a highly symbolic function, renewing not only a depressed area of the city, but also the profile of the state government.<sup>22</sup> With typical hyperbole, the governor called it 'the first building of the twenty-first century'.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Helmut's Chance*

Though Thompson liked to proclaim the innovation of his signature building, the State of Illinois Centre followed the model created by Daley, in which public authorities commissioned iconic buildings from prominent Chicago architecture firms in order to generate urban renewal in the form of private development. In a small sketch published in *Progressive Architecture* in 1981, Jahn illustrated the position of the new civic building in relation to those built under Daley's sponsorship along Dearborn Street. Squeezed between other, more compelling sketches, this plan is nonetheless important because it establishes that Jahn saw his own project in the context of these earlier models. Within that lineage, however, the State of Illinois Centre disclosed two points of difference: its incorporation of commercial functions in response to new urban planning imperatives, and its style, which took the Daley mode of elegant facsimiles of modernist sleekness in an unexpected new direction.

After considering several firms, Governor Thompson awarded the contract to C F Murphy & Associates.<sup>24</sup> This was an obvious and somewhat conservative choice: with close ties to the mayor and to Mies's office, Murphy's firm represented the business side of the Chicago School, one that perpetuated orthodox Miesianism. Importantly for Thompson, it had been responsible for a series of civic commissions dating back to the 1950s, including the Daley Centre, designed by Jacques Brownson. As Tigerman's genealogical mapping shows, Murphy was an inheritor of the Chicago tradition of large architectural practices organised according to the corporate model: he had worked for Ernest Graham, who had worked for Daniel Burnham. Just as Murphy had himself risen from the ranks of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, he was about to pass the baton to the 38-year-old Helmut Jahn. In Tigerman's family tree, Jahn occupies a prime place in the sixth generation, a position he owed to a conflagration on the South Side lake front.

Jahn had first arrived in Chicago in 1967, after winning a Rotary Scholarship to study at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Born in Nuremberg in 1940, he received a pre-68 architectural education at the Technische Hochschule in Munich, where the beaux-arts method was supplemented with a strong technical basis and a touch of

Atrium, State of Illinois Centre,  
Chicago, c 1990  
© Paul Sequeira / Getty Images



Bauhaus functionalism. Soon after his arrival he began working for Gene Summers, Mies's long-time assistant, who had just set up on his own.<sup>25</sup> The timing was fortuitous. That same year Charles F Murphy was awarded the commission to rebuild a large convention centre, McCormick Place, after it had been destroyed by fire. It was an important commission, but Murphy's chief designer Brownson had just left the firm, so he had to quickly find someone with the necessary skill to take it on. On Mies's recommendation he hired Summers to work on the project, and Jahn came along too. Between 1967 and 1973 Summers and Jahn worked together on McCormick Place II, basing it on Mies's famous prototype – somewhat too closely and obsessively for Jahn, who began to chafe at the restrictions of this way of working. When he rebelled by rounding off the corner of a building, his working relationship with his mentor was over. Summers would quit C F Murphy in 1973, leaving Jahn to become the director of planning and design. These changes signalled that the firm was edging into wider conceptual territory.<sup>26</sup> If C F Murphy had been a bastion of Miesianism, that position was more pragmatic than ideological. Now Jahn was freed to flirt with other styles.

He began by first experimenting with pop and with modernist mannerism. In a series of projects designed for locations throughout the Midwest – for example, the Public Library in Michigan City, Indiana (1977), the First Bank Centre in South Bend, Indiana (1977), and the larger Argonne National Laboratories for the Department of Energy in Argonne, Illinois (1981) – he knowingly broke the rules of modernist architectural language, recombining its elements in playful and ironic ways. Geometric rearrangements of modernist blocks, these shed-like buildings had exposed metal trusses and translucent, fibreglass wall panels. With their open interiors enlivened with bright colours, they were clearly indebted to the high-tech buildings of James Stirling and Norman Foster.<sup>27</sup> Heinrich Klotz has described Jahn's work from this period as a version of 'tank and container construction', in which the glass wrapper appears to dematerialise the building's huge bulk – a strategy popular with architects such as César Pelli and Kevin Roche.<sup>28</sup> When these constructions are undecorated, Klotz argued, they become 'size-indifferent abstractions', difficult to comprehend because they are unrelated to any human, architectural or urban scale. In his design for the State of Illinois Centre, Jahn would turn to contextual cues and abstracted historic references in order to naturalise this formula in the context of downtown Chicago.

Seeking a striking visual identity for the important State Centre commission, Jahn returned to the beaux-arts practice of form-making, creating a volume derived from the different programmatic elements and deformed by the various pressures on the square site, clothing it in the transparent curtain wall that had become the Chicago vernacular. Describing the building in the *Inland Architect*, Jahn declared it 'a new typology for an urban office building' created from the synthesis of historical styles: 'In a time when architecture is the subject of a great theoretical debate, State Centre takes a polemical position for appropriate and innovative recomposition of classic and modern principles of the building arts.'<sup>29</sup>

Though he told the Chicago Tribune that he did not believe in the principle, Jahn's strategy approaches Thomas Schumacher's definition of 'contextualism', as 'the notion that some ideal forms can exist as fragments, "collaged" into an empirical environment, and that other ideal forms can withstand elaborate deformations in the process of being adjusted to a context'.<sup>30</sup> Explaining his design process via a series of sketches, Jahn adapts the platonic forms of the sphere,

the cone and the cube to the particular context of the site, and then combines them with the modernist vernacular of the curtain wall in order to arrive at the squat mass later characterised as a 'space ship', or a 'bloated bubble', among other unflattering epithets.<sup>31</sup>

Only 17 storeys high, but covering a whole block, the State of Illinois Centre was in no way a skyscraper, at least not by Chicago standards. In fact, the form Jahn chose was an evolution of his earlier container buildings, with greater emphasis on the centralised space contained within than on the exterior form. As his diagrams illustrate, he took as his starting point the conventional symmetrical and domed form of neoclassical government buildings such as Henry Ives Cobb's 1905 Federal Building (later demolished to make way for Mies's Federal complex), enlarging and abstracting the components of that building type. His principal move was to expand the scale of the neoclassical rotunda, fragmenting it and opening it up underneath for street-level and subterranean access. Designed to incorporate a new El station at Lake Street, the building might be likened to a chicken incubating an infrastructural egg.

The mass was then wrapped in a taut glass facade with coloured glazing ranging from blue at the base to white at the top. Sitting within a square city block, this curved wall carves away some of the available building volume, disrupting the undifferentiated Chicago grid and creating an outdoor plaza facing the two adjacent civic buildings – an exterior partner to the interior atrium and a 'gift to the city', in Jahn's words.<sup>32</sup> Following in the tradition of Chicago's modernist plazas, an outdoor sculpture, Jean Dubuffet's Monument with Standing Beast, was chosen as the focal point.<sup>33</sup> While its curve rendered it somewhat fortress-like, the openness of the facade at the street level gave it porosity, a point emphasised by its 'double' nature (interior atrium and exterior plaza joined by circular paving pattern).

Besides its unusual shape and polychrome facade, the State of Illinois Centre also featured controversial references to historic ornament at the street level. Mimicking the neoclassical colonnades along LaSalle Street, Jahn created one of his own on the west side of the centre, cladding it in horizontal stripes of pink and grey granite. The colonnade continues around the southern edge of the plaza as a line of two-dimensional mock columns progressively diminishing in size. Intended to define and express the street grid, these columns are the most explicitly historicist feature of the building and as such became the focus of his critics' fury, who likened them to Venturi's enlarged pediment or Graves' oversized keystone.

However, Jahn's abstraction and manipulation of the elements of Chicago public architecture was not purely playful, but was in the service of the building's hybrid programme. While his sculptural spaceship appears to have little in common with the overt historicism of his peers, he shared with Venturi a fascination with the productive combination of high and low culture. And like Venturi, Jahn was interested in the mannerist manipulation of both the architectural programme (its functions) and its medium (its form). Working with his client, he created a new model for a government building, one that was not separate from the commercial life of the city, but fully integrated with it: part government centre, part office building, part transit hub and part shopping mall. The open-plan office floors (coloured yellow and orange in the 1979 drawings) sit atop three floors of commercial space.<sup>34</sup> A pharmacy, shoe repair shop, photo-processing lab, currency exchange and copy service were among the original tenants when the building first opened. Below the offices and shops, there is street-level access to public services (coloured



red), including driver's licence and taxpayer assistance offices, and a 600-seat auditorium 'available for lunch hour concerts, civic functions etc'.<sup>35</sup> A 17-storey, 50m-diameter atrium connects all parts of the building. These commercial functions were developed without public financing under a long-term lease agreement between the state and a developer. Encouraging use of the public services, the commercial space was a vital part of the building programme. Besides helping to defray the construction costs – the state earned around \$15 million over the first 15 years of operation<sup>36</sup> – it ensured that the centre remained lively at all hours of the day.

While the larger North Loop redevelopment project floundered in the 1980s, suffering from the lack of a consistent plan and dwindling support after Daley's death, matched by rising concerns about the scale of demolition, the State of Illinois Centre achieved its objectives. Once completed, it was widely publicised and well used. The centrepiece of a large, city-sponsored urban redevelopment project dependent on public-private partnerships for its realisation, it illustrated how new buildings might incorporate significant public spaces connected to the wider circulation network. In this context the building's commercial orientation was acceptable to its creators: combined with necessary state functions, and lending them metropolitan glamour, commercial activity would regenerate public life, and vice-versa. By the time it opened in March 1985, budget overruns had resulted in some cost-cutting, such as the substitution of flanged steel for the internal space frame in favour of Jahn's specified tubular steel (a cheaper but less elegant solution), along with the removal of office doors (resulting in complaints about lack of privacy and security issues), and the re-use of some furniture from the old state building. More significantly, the elimination of the energy-saving double-glazed facade led to ongoing problems keeping the building cool. In the summers of 1985 and 1986 temperatures inside the stores ranged from the high 70s to the mid-90s Fahrenheit. Tenants threatened to withhold their rents and the National Boulevard Bank of Chicago explored installing its own HVAC system. However, as with Stirling's History Faculty building in Cambridge (1968), the technical shortcomings were forgiven, at least in the architectural press. Professional journals featured lavish colour spreads on the building, highlighting the spectacular circular atrium and supporting Thompson's claim that this was a vibrant 'twenty-first-century' building.

#### *Nobility or Vulgarly*

While Jahn's career soared in the wake of its construction, the State of Illinois Centre is much less celebrated than other projects he completed around the same time, such as the United Airlines Terminal at O'Hare Airport (1983–87). Some critics approved, at first, seeing the reinstatement of the neoclassical dome and plaza and the creation of an animated public interior as a return to the ideal of the town square. For Jim Murphy, writing in *Progressive Architecture*, or Paul Gapp, writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, the building signalled a conservative 'return to order'. Murphy declared that the building's 'humane, stimulating environment ... re-establish[ed] the social role of architecture'.<sup>37</sup> Gapp praised its 'monumental character and towering rotunda', saying that it reintroduced 'ceremony and nobility of gesture' to the city's public buildings.<sup>38</sup> Others critics saw it as a break with tradition, but in a positive sense, as a rebuke to the austerity of modernism. 'Mr Jahn has surely killed the curse of dullness that afflicts virtually every other government office building of our time', Paul Goldberger proclaimed in *The New York Times*.<sup>39</sup> Whether understanding the Illinois

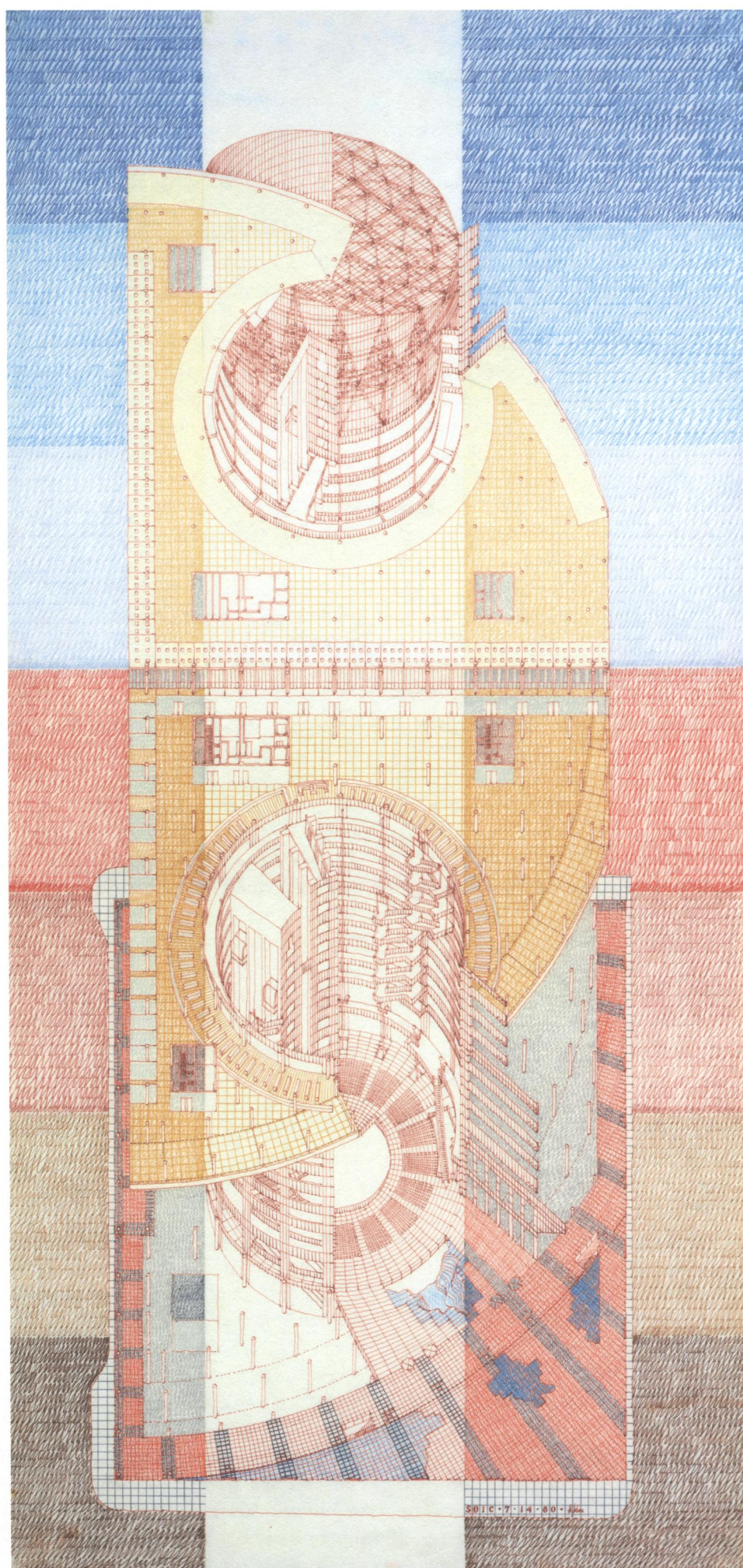
State Centre as a return to tradition or as an innovative experiment, these critics were united in their praise for the open and transparent atrium, with its play of light and shadow through the glass facade, its exposed elevators travelling up and down, and the continuous movement of people through it. Such a space, apparently, could make the process of government seem appealing, even exciting.<sup>40</sup>

More cynical critics, however, raised an eyebrow at the heroic character of the building. Stanley Tigerman, otherwise Jahn's champion, found it somewhat naïve, given the notoriously corrupt nature of city politics.<sup>41</sup> As a former federal prosecutor, Thompson had run for the governorship in 1976 on a reformist ticket,<sup>42</sup> but once in office it was more or less business as usual. Pointing to cost overruns and rumours of bribery in the awarding of construction contracts, Tigerman asked if the city and the state were really such paragons of nobility as the monumental building suggested. Journalists drew a connection, and not a positive one, between the bold architecture and the governor's self-aggrandising ways: The *Wall Street Journal* commented: 'He likes to ride the glass-walled public elevators while asking citizens how they like the place. He has held so many ceremonies there recently that some wags say he plans to dedicate it every day until the next election.'<sup>43</sup>

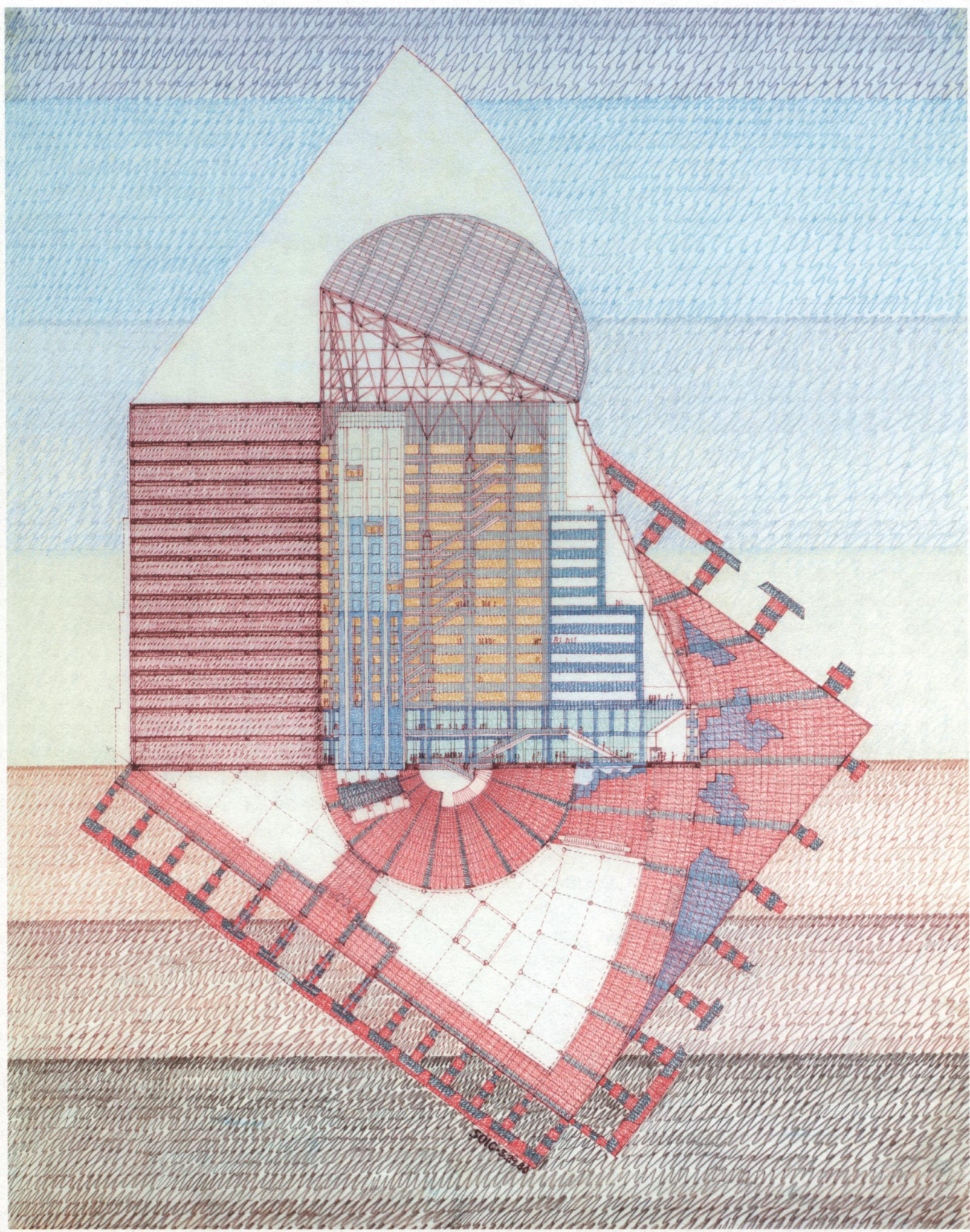
For those less closely connected to Chicago and its complex politics it was not the specific context of the building that made its monumental form questionable, but the idea that it represented a new model for public buildings in general. The conflation of government building and commercial functions was viewed negatively for two related reasons. First, this conflation aligned the serious world of public affairs with the flashy, even feminine world of shopping; and second, it represented an inauthentic, even fake, form of public life. To consider the first accusation, it is clear that many critics thought Jahn guilty of crimes against good taste. For them the showy State Centre was not just populist; with its exaggerated forms and colourful, reflective surfaces it veered into the realm of camp. Paul Goldberger concluded there had been a price to pay for 'killing the curse of dullness': 'it is all pretty shrill, and not a little vulgar'.<sup>44</sup> One of the building's harshest critics was Harry Weese, the older brother of Ben Weese, who had been so keen that Jahn have a shot at the 'Late Entries' for the Chicago Tribune Tower. For Weese, the building appealed to the worst aspects of popular culture. 'Tinselly and decadent', it was like 'a goldfish bowl that symbolises the fragility of our society'.<sup>45</sup> Weese echoed many others when he warned that combining civic functions with profit-making activities debased the nobler goals of government. The building's 'vulgarity', its appeal to popular taste, made it unsuitable as a symbol of the state.<sup>46</sup>

Part of the problem seemed to be that the building's unusual form made it impossible to read alongside its neighbours: with its squat proportions, it could never be a tower. While Jahn saw this as a gesture of modesty – a governmental skyscraper would be unusual and untraditional, and therefore undesirable – many critics were deeply troubled by the shape he chose. Heinrich Klotz, otherwise an admirer, found that the 'anti-dome', the oblique top, 'hardly suggests any demonstrative gesture or powerful attribute of the state. With this innovative form, Jahn was obviously mocking representation.' By abandoning the illusion of height, along with the conventional form of a finished building, Jahn had forfeited monumentality, Klotz wrote.<sup>47</sup> In the spirit of Freud – and Torre – the flat, oblique atrium roof could be seen as a vulva-like opening, the Other of the missing phallic tower. However, far from deliberately









Helmut Jahn, State of Illinois Centre,  
 composite plan and axonometric (*opposite*), and  
 composite plan, section and elevation (*above*), 1979  
 © Deutsches Architekturmuseum,  
 Frankfurt am Main / Uwe Dettmar



mocking traditional representation, Jahn seems to have been wholly sincere in looking for other references for his version of monumentality: perhaps what we have here is the top of the neo-gothic Tribune Tower, seen through the hole in Oldenburg's clothespin?

Whatever the case, the critique of the aesthetic of mass culture extended also to the activities that took place inside the building. The governor's office sponsored a roster of events reflecting the diversity of Chicago's population as well as the traditional ethnic segregation of its electorate. In 1986 these included: 'Illinois Salute to the Irish'; 'Hispanic Heritage Week Celebration'; 'American Indian Day in Illinois'; and a concert by the National Council of Negro Women Community Choir.<sup>48</sup> That year a press release chimed: 'There are more things going on in this state building than there are in some states. There are so many things to do and see, it's no wonder we're one of the most popular attractions in Chicago.'<sup>49</sup> But critics questioned these events, seeing them as stage-managed spectacles rather than expressions of real life. Architect Donlyn Lyndon argued that this new kind of public space was dedicated to nothing more than 'consumers having fun', on a par with a shopping mall or 'any other of the fictions of urbane city life that have been constructed in Chicago's Loop and the various central business districts of America'.<sup>50</sup>

#### *Postmodern Monument*

Doubts over the authenticity of public life inside the State of Illinois Centre only added to the difficulty of evaluating the building. Did Jahn's contextual and historic references, and sincere attempt to synthesise the monumentality of the civic building with the appeal of commercial architecture amount to a praiseworthy piece of architecture? More simply, is it good or bad? Over time, negative opinion began to prevail, making it available for incorporation into a different, more scholarly, kind of narrative. The completion of the centre coincided with the rise of a new form of critique in the US, one in which buildings were seen through the thick lenses of political and social theory. For a generation of critical theorists, the glamorous and fortified architecture of late capitalism presented irrefutable evidence of social decline, and confirmed contemporary architecture's status as primarily an image. Though they claimed not to be concerned with aesthetic judgement, these theorists seemed to prefer bad buildings to good ones, because of the easy association between ugliness, decadence and cultural decline.

The critique of postmodernism – as embodied in commercial architecture – was built on a series of assumptions about the relationship between present and past, public and private. Where the architectural avant-garde had sought a rupture with the past, postmodernism privileged instead the idea of the present being in a continuum with the past. But, for academics such as Frederic Jameson and Hal Foster, it pointed towards a different kind of rupture – one between public and private space. Even though it was marked by an impulse towards contextualism, in which designers sought a greater connection between a building and its surroundings, in practice – they argued – the result was an abdication of the responsibility to design for the public.<sup>51</sup> In this sense postmodern architecture was cast as an infrastructural support for neoconservative politics and economics, the built consequence of neoliberal urban development practices and an agent of privatisation contributing to the death of the public sphere. For Jameson, the vast, privately owned atriums of the 1970s and 1980s, epitomised by John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel, spoke of a sinister new concept of the city

and civic life.<sup>52</sup> Essentially inauthentic replicas of public space, they signalled a rejection of the unpalatable reality of the public street in favour of autonomous internal worlds. Jameson interpreted the atrium as being 'spectacular', in the sense employed by Guy Debord – an hallucinatory space designed to beguile and trick.

It is certainly possible to read the State of Illinois Centre through Jameson's critique of the Bonaventure, seeing it as a similar indicator of postmodern schizophrenia and alienation.<sup>53</sup> However, key to Jameson's critique of postmodernism was the charge that any adaptation of or reference to the commercial vernacular was a reversal of modernist practice, and one that would invariably have negative social consequences. Crucially, his assertion depends on the idea of a rupture between the architectural and urban ideals of early modernism and those of the era of late capital. As we have seen, when Jahn's building is understood in its local context, this assumption is questionable. Along with Michael Graves' Portlandia building, it was one of the few large-scale examples of state-sponsored civic architecture produced in the United States in the 1980s. Occupying a highly visible site in the deteriorating centre of Illinois' largest city, it was designed to be open and transparent, and to renew the public profile of the state and its activities with an attractive (in all senses of the word) building. Rather than being necessarily an agent of privatisation in a declining public sphere, Jahn's building could equally well serve to counter generic claims about postmodern privatising urbanism.

Although the State of Illinois Centre exhibits the formal qualities of postmodern architecture, it was created within the framework of an essentially modernist understanding of the agency of government in the creation of architecture and urban design. As imagined in the late 1970s, the building was part of a broader effort to renew the civic importance and economic viability of the downtown Chicago Loop. Built by the state government with the support of the city as the centrepiece of an urban redevelopment plan, it is the product of cooperation between government agencies and private companies, an attempt to regenerate a depressed downtown by integrating commercial activity with public functions. Seen in this way, it was a late-twentieth-century version of an early-twentieth-century American architectural typology, the utopian mega-structure fully plugged into the city around it, uniting all its functions. Not an aberration or a rupture with established practice, but a continuation of the city's political and architectural traditions.<sup>54</sup>

In Chicago, as Manfredo Tafuri and the members of the Venice School famously argued, modern architecture was never revolutionary.<sup>55</sup> Instead, the attempted realisation of an architectural utopia on the shores of Lake Michigan produced a city that perfectly served capitalism and its associated social reformulations. By the mid-1950s Chicago, popularly understood as the ne plus ultra of modern cities, needed to be renewed. No longer the creation of capitalist investment, its powerful mayor proceeded to remake it in that image. Indeed, the structure of the architectural profession was set up to do this, with knowledge passed down through the generations in the large firms. Part of a dynamic and constantly shifting capitalist landscape, Chicagoan postmodernism was therefore essentially a variation of the late modernist forms of Mies, SOM and their postwar colleagues. Helmut Jahn's State of Illinois Centre can be marshalled as evidence of this. Rather than a dramatic rupture with the political agenda of modernism, Chicago's postmodern architecture was in this sense the ultimate fulfilment of the modernist project in the United States, the sublimation of modern architecture into spectacle.

1. Claes Oldenburg, quoted in Richard Axson, *Three Decades of Contemporary Art: The Dr John and Rose M Shuey Collection* (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Cranbrook Art Museum, 2001).
2. Stanley Tigerman and Stuart E Cohen (eds), *Late Entries to the Chicago Tribune Competition of 1922* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1980).
3. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1977).
4. Stuart E Cohen, 'Introduction', *Late Entries*, op cit, p 8.
5. Heinrich Klotz, *Twentieth-Century Architecture: Drawings, Models, Furniture* (London: Academy Editions, 1989).
6. David Van Zanten, 'The Nineteenth Century: The Projecting of Chicago as a Commercial City and the Rationalisation of Design and Construction', in *Chicago and New York: Architectural Interactions* (Chicago, IL: Art Institute of Chicago, 1984), p 30. The date 1941 refers to the publication of Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*, in which the idea of a unified Chicago School became calcified.
7. John Zukowsky (ed), *Chicago Architecture and Design 1923-1993: Reconfiguration of an American Metropolis* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1993).
8. Stuart E Cohen, op cit, p 7.
9. Joanne Lipman, 'Trump Plans Complex in Manhattan with TV Studios and 150-Story Tower', *Wall Street Journal*, 19 November 1985, p 10.
10. *Progressive Architecture*, February 1981. PA published slightly different versions of the drawings: the date is erased and some of the colours are changed; the background colours are not hatched but solid in tone.
11. Chicago Department of Planning, *North Loop Guidelines for Conservation and Redevelopment* (Chicago Department of Planning, 1980-89), pp 4-5.
12. On the postwar Chicago growth machine and Daley's efforts at urban renewal see Mike Royko, *Boss: Richard J Daley of Chicago* (New York, NY: E P Dutton, 1971); Carl W Condit, *Chicago, 1930-70: Building, Planning and Urban Technology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Milton Rakove, *Don't Make No Waves, Don't Back No Losers: An Insider's Analysis of the Daley Machine* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975); Gregory D Squires, Larry Bennett, Kathleen McCourt, *Chicago: Race, Class and the Response to Urban Decline* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, 1987); Lois Wille, *At Home in the Loop: How Clout and Community Built Chicago's Dearborn Park* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1997); Joel Rast, *Remaking Chicago: The Political Origins of Urban Industrial Change* (Chicago, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999); and Dominic Pacyga, 'Daly's City and Apocalypse Now or Regeneration?', *Chicago: A Biography* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp 323-58, 360-80.
13. Ross Miller, 'City Hall and the Architecture of Power: The Rise and Fall of the Dearborn Corridor', in John Zukowsky (ed), *Chicago Architecture and Design 1923-1993*, pp 246-63.
14. Miller, 'City Hall and the Architecture of Power', p 255.
15. John Zukowsky, 'The Burden of History: Chicago Architecture Before and After the Great Depression and World War II', in Zukowsky, ed, op cit, p 18.
16. Stanley Tigerman, 'Chicago Architects: Genealogy and Exegesis', *ibid*, pp 311-26.
17. *North Loop Guidelines*, op cit, p 5. See also Larry Bennett, Kathleen McCourt, Philip W Nyden and Gregory D Squires, 'Chicago's North Loop Redevelopment Project: A Growth Machine on Hold', in Scott Cummings (ed), *Business Elites and Urban Development: Case Studies and Critical Perspectives* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp 183-202; and D Bradford Hunt and Jon B DeVries, 'Planning in the Void: Redevelopment in the North Loop and Near South', in *Planning Chicago* (Chicago, IL: American Planning Association, 2013), pp 79-86.
18. The lack of masterplanning for the North Loop area was a continual problem. In particular, the proposed redevelopment initially involved the demolition of a series of historically significant buildings, particularly theatres. Many of these were saved and renovated due to the efforts of historic preservation advocates. See Larry Bennett et al, op cit, p 192. On the rise of the preservation movement in postwar Chicago, see Daniel Bluestone, 'Preservation and Renewal in Post-World War II Chicago', *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol 47, no 4 (May 1994), pp 210-23.
19. Samuel Kimbell Grove, *Illinois Politics and Government: The Expanding Metropolitan Frontier* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).
20. Capital Development Board, State of Illinois, 'Background on the State of Illinois Centre, 100 West Randolph, Chicago IL 60601' [Created by the Office of Public Affairs, March 1985], Ryerson and Burnham Library, Art Institute of Chicago.
21. *Ibid*, p 5.
22. *Ibid*.
23. *Ibid*, p 3.
24. In its design of the building, C F Murphy & Associates partnered with the engineering firm of Lester B Knight & Associates. Capital Development Board, State of Illinois, 'Background on the State of Illinois Centre' [Created by the Office of Public Relations] ND, c 1985. Ryerson and Burnham Library, Art Institute of Chicago.
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