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Places

Title

The Government Building Redefined [Debate on the State of Illinois Center]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/82h5w9ps>

Journal

Places, 3(4)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1987-01-15

Peer reviewed

The Government Building Redefined

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In the nineteenth century, a government building was thought to be monumental, formal, and neoclassical. Its plan was highly symmetrical, with a grand ceremonial space in the center (often a domed rotunda) flanked by multistoried office wings. The rotunda was reached by a grand exterior stair leading to a portico and interior antechambers. It was devoid of activity except on ceremonial occasions and/or when people passed through.

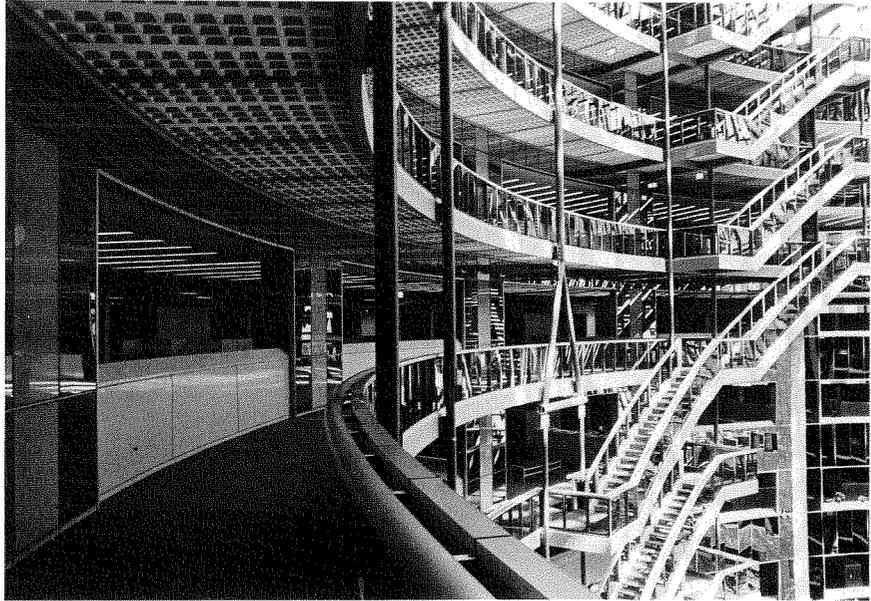
In the twentieth century, a government building often has been considered as a statement of bureaucratic efficiency. In order to save tax dollars, the grand ceremonial space was replaced by a lobby, and the exterior was made to look like any other office building. Gone is the sense of public or civic significance.

In the State of Illinois Center, the concept of a government office building has been redefined. The program has been enlarged to include public activities in the form of shops, restaurants, an auditorium, and a gallery. The rotunda has returned and been expanded to grandiose proportions such that it spatially dominates the building and interrelates all activities. A sense of openness, availability, and accessibility permeates this building from the street level entrance to the open plan offices that directly face the rotunda-atrium across surrounding galleries.

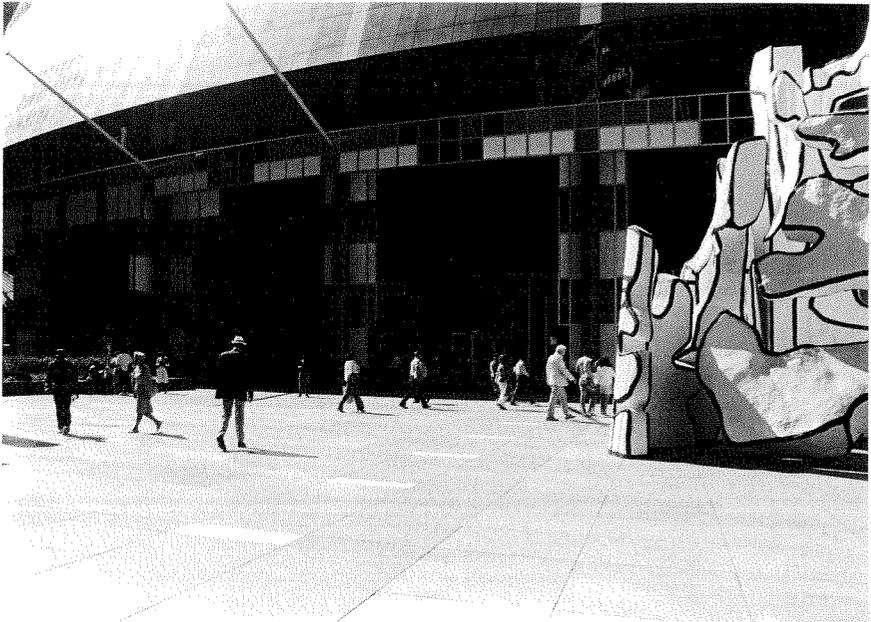
In recent decades, several government buildings have

incorporated an atrium. The Boston City Hall (1969) has a kind of atrium with a complex section, whereas the Dallas City Hall (1978) has a 223 foot long, six-story atrium with a stepped section. At the Hart Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C., the atrium is eight stories high and T-shaped in plan. In Minneapolis, the sixty-foot wide, twenty-four story atrium at the Hennepin County Government Center (1974) unites two towers. In each of these cases, the design intentions for the atrium are similar: to provide a significant public space while fostering a sense of spacial community among the staff. In each case, the latter intention is achieved with greater success than the former; the public spaces suffer from a lack of true public purpose and its design realization.

In the State of Illinois Center, this dual intention is admirably achieved. The public space is truly public, in large part because there is a public program. This building incorporates 82,000 net square feet of commercial space on the bottom three levels along with several public-access state functions. The public has abundant reason to be there, to eat, drink, shop, or obtain services. The rotunda-atrium spatially and visually unites the government employees on the floors above with this public activity and vice versa. Bureaucratic divisions are spatially eased by the open relationship of offices to galleries and the interfloor stairs suspended in the atrium. All floors are physically united by the prominently placed glass-enclosed



5A



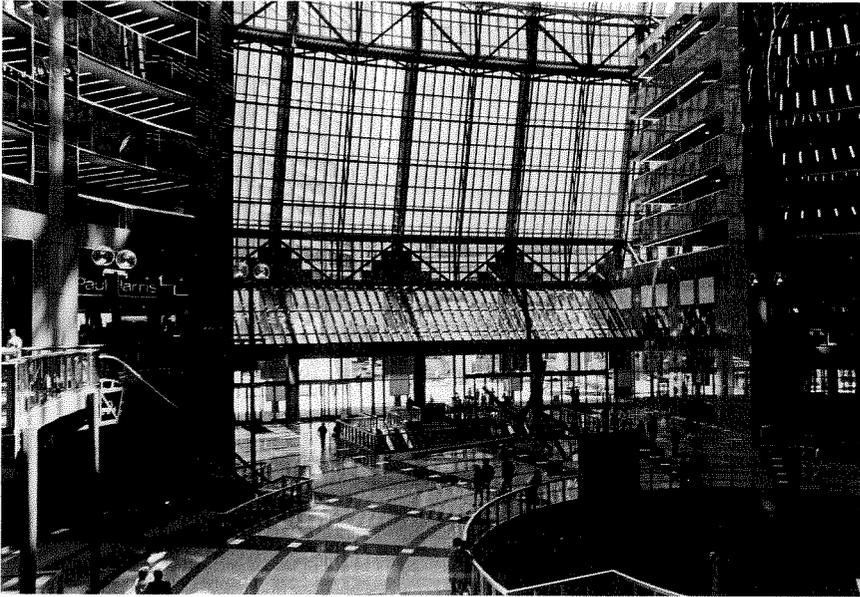
5B

5 Atrium, different levels.

All photographs by Michael J. Bednar.

5A Corridors open to atrium

5B Entry plaza

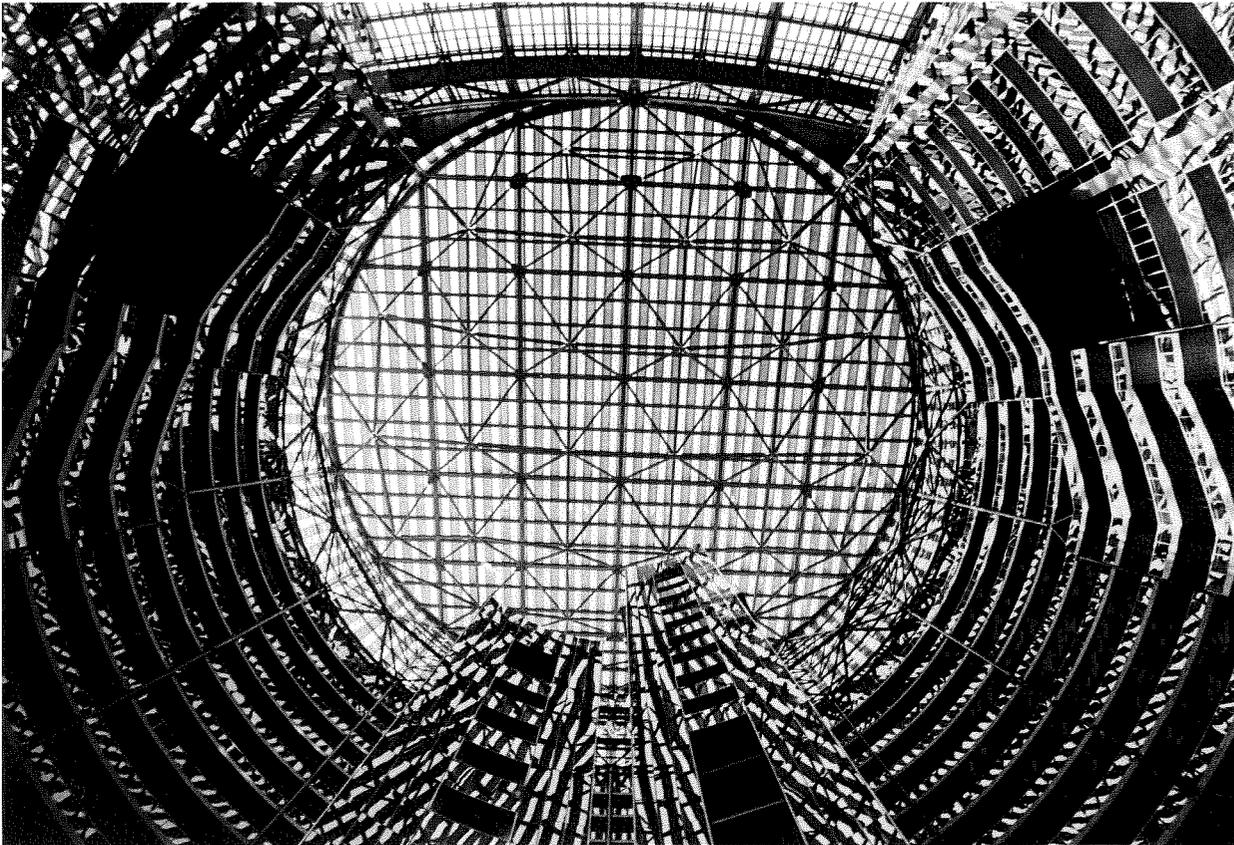


5C

elevators. The concourse level, however, is dissociated from the main space despite the circular well at the center and the escalator well at the entry.

The processional sequence in this building is very literally manifested in the spatial form. Even from the exterior plaza at the corner of the site, a pedestrian can already see his/her destination in the building and the means to get there. The sequence begins at the plaza and passes through a layer of arcaded space that serves as the entryway to the triple-tiered ante-atrium and the rotunda-atrium itself. The elevator lobbies lead to the office galleries and their interfloor stairs, all suspended within the rotunda-atrium. Because of its sloped top and the strong diagonal/radial movement that leads to its free standing elevator cores, this magnificent space has a more dynamic quality than most rotundas. In fact, the whole place is alive with movement, which can be viewed from every vantage point within. This constant stream of pedestrian movement, its reflections in the numerous clear and reflected glass surfaces, and the changing patterns of daylight provide a visual interplay that holds the observer spellbound.

The visual interplay, however, does not end with the excitement of movement and daylight. The architectural expression of the rotunda-atrium is uniquely that of Helmut Jahn, a kind of high-tech, constructivist postmodernism. The blue and rose color scheme is visually overpowering when carried



5D

out on so vast a scale. This composition of brightly colored linear elements and transparent surfaces yields an aura of tension and freneticism. The earth-toned, radially patterned granite floor is in stark contrast to all other aspects of the space since it is a richly patterned surface. The combination of daylight, movement, and unrestrained expression results in a place that exists at the point of self-destruction with only the power of the great circular form to hold it together. In a way, the architectural expression challenges the power of the space and the rich and varied activity within. It is not a place of

repose, as are other rotundas, yet it is a place of compelling attraction.

The historical significance of this building is not primarily in its unique exterior form or its audacious architectural expression. It is the power of the rotunda-atrium that makes this building significant, because it spatially and programatically unites the public servant and the general public. By establishing a public space of grandeur and excitement in both scale and form, the nature of the government office building has been redefined and a strong precedent has been established for the future.

5D View into atrium