It was high time I spent some time at the Thompson Center. After all, we basically came up in Chicago together. It got here first, but only by a few years. In fact, when the building was new and still called the State of Illinois Center, it played an indirect part in drawing me here. I got my first Illinois driver's license there. It’s where I bled for the LifeSource blood bank.

Now, more than twenty-five years later, we don’t see each other much. I no longer work downtown. There’s a more convenient blood bank on my way home—and it has parking. Driver’s licenses can be renewed online. The kind of mundanities that can create greater distance between friends than any major blow-up.

Yet a grim prognosis can be all it takes to prompt a reunion. Hearing that the Thompson Center might not be around for much longer was enough to bring me in for an early morning visit. What I saw this month simultaneously took me back and knocked me back. The building hasn’t changed a bit, seeming to have frozen in time. Yet it manages to look quite worse for wear. It hasn’t enjoyed any upgrades since
1985. Crumbling and rot can be plainly seen along the edges of pillars. When you have these thoughts looking at an old friend, the back of your mind asks whether your friend is thinking the same about you.

The building still looks like nothing else downtown. At least, nothing in its vicinity. Round and squat, it takes the shape of a headless cone with three sections that recline backward from the one below. Imagine that you’d just finished frosting a big glass three-layer cake before sneezing and jerking the plate toward yourself.

A wild black-and-white sculpture by Jean Debuffet stands at its corner on Clark and Randolph, answering the age-old question, “What would an aquarium plant’s cartoon ghost look like?” It’s actually called Monument with Standing Beast, but according to Wikipedia, all of us Chicagoans affectionately call it “Snoopy in a blender.” Not to suggest that Wikipedia contains fabricated information, but I’ve never heard a single Chicagoan call it that. So I’ll just log in and correct that entry to the nickname we all use: “Aquarium Plant Cartoon Ghost.”

Dotting this plaza are tall red tubes that promote the “Atrium at the Thompson” within. A rather weak attempt to reinvigorate an outdated mall inside a government building. It’s not the Thompson’s fault. Slapping some vaguely hip-sounding brand onto its poorly maintained structure is something any desperate building of a certain age might do. Without the state there to jump in with the right makeovers and timely “you got this” pep talks throughout the years, what neglected building wouldn’t slide into a state of disrepair and self-pity?

Whew. I’m feeling for my old friend as I walk back through its doors.
They open into the vast, open-air atrium that goes straight up to the top, capped by a flat round glass ceiling. The floors stretching skyward are semi-circles ringing the open atrium, open office areas that have mirror-edged balconies. It’s easy to hear what’s going on in the offices. The building’s open design was intended to both symbolize and foster open government. The state government without walls or privacy. In essence, a terrarium for civil servants.

Funny thing about all that transparency and sunlight: it seems to make conducting government business rather difficult.

The State of Illinois Center opened at double its original budget [Caro]. That was even after skimping on the building’s glass, opting for single-pane windows instead of architect Helmut Jahn’s original specs for energy-saving double-pane glass [Cox]. And so, in a structure with a tall open space surrounded by nothing but glass, the immediate issues became air conditioning, which failed immediately after opening, and unforgiving glare. Workers brought in beach umbrellas and fans to cope with these factors during the day [Barnhart], but then had to take home sensitive papers every night—and had personal effects stolen—due to the ease of accessing doorless offices [Cox].

The open structure also means noise travels freely throughout the building, and there is usually plenty of it. The symbolism of “openness” extended to the exposed workings of elevators and escalators, which may have looked fascinating but noisily overwhelmed nearby workers. Smells from the food court down below also wind up making their way into the workspaces [Pearson]. So even people in
government—the figurative sausage-makers—can’t stomach how the real stuff gets made.

Ahead from the entrance is a large circular balcony, closed except for a set of down escalators, overlooking the lower level and its food court. It was in this rather cramped spot that Governor Bruce Rauner held his press conference last year, announcing his intent to sell the Thompson Center and relocate its state workers to less costly digs. Behind Rauner’s pitch for this cost-saving move is a pretty pointed dislike for the building: he sees no point in anyone repurposing the building.

“This building is ineffective.” “All [the people who work here] are eager to move elsewhere.” “It’s just not usable for much of anything.” “[I]t’s just structural beams and some glass, so it doesn’t cost that much to take down…” [Pearson].

Come on now, Governor. Don’t hold back.

Developers are presumably salivating at the prospect of having this prime downtown block. Something like $100 million of upkeep has been deferred for years. The building now makes news with reports of carpets held together with duct tape, granite panels falling off, infestations of cockroaches and bedbugs. It seems inevitable that the building might be seeing its final days. So here I am, having that “maybe this is it, old friend” visit.

The floor directly below the ground floor balcony is free of tables, allowing a clear view of its inlaid spirals of salmon and black diamonds in the floor. There’s a scene from the 1986 film Running Scared in which huge bags of cocaine are thrown down from high up in the glass elevators to explode all over these floors. Probably the last time any kind of money was sunk into the building.
This lower level food court has the feel of any suburban mall, if it basically hadn’t changed in thirty years. The fast food options are fairly standard: Dunkin’ Donuts, Sbarro, Burger King, Panda Express and others, as well as the more exotic New Orleans Kitchen and Tokyo Lunch Boxes. On this morning around 8:10, the crowd is light. Maybe ten percent of the tables in the court are occupied.

Most patrons here today look like they work with their hands. Guys in Carhartt coveralls, sturdy blue hoodies—attire for the business of outdoors—sitting in groups of four or eight. One group to my right, just in front of Dunkin’ Donuts, are talking sports. Their banter is charged with the Chicago accent, mini-challenges and dismissals.

“Who won the game last night?” “A tie!” I know which game they’re talking about. A terrible, throwaway Sunday night game.

There are also some people in business clothes. Nothing too fashionable: these outfits would blend into any state service office. These workers appear on the mature side, into their fifties. They read print newspapers, which are usually the Sun-Times. Before they head to work, they chat with colleagues in passing.

There is a bird in here.

It is small, a swallow or something, that has landed on a seat back at the table next to me. It looks around, cocks its head at me, and moves a chair closer, gauging whether or not I’ll feed it. When I don’t, it flits to a tabletop and pecks at a few crumbs before vanishing. Nobody else seemed to notice or care. It seemed completely natural until I remembered this wasn’t outdoor seating.
I finish my coffee and head back upstairs. On my way out, I see that one of the main windows by the entrance is being boarded over.

Okay. I get it. This place has seen better days.

In 1985, this building was crazy stuff for Chicago. The Tribune critic titled his review “Helmut Jahn’s State of Illinois Center Is: 1) Breathtaking? 2) Impudent? 3) Outrageous? 4) Idiosyncratic? 5) All the Above” [Moser]. To this day, nearly every article calls the Thompson Center something akin to “striking but controversial.”

Shall we be blunt? Despite wanting to run with the “world-class cities,” Chicago has never been at ease with the unusual. You know what else Chicago considered “outrageous” and “impudent” in 1985? Jim McMahon. The Bears’ “Punky QB.” Because, you see, he wore sunglasses all the time, and his hair was kind of spiky. Oh, also? Sometimes his headband had words on it. Outrageous!

Even the Picasso sculpture on Daley Plaza—the symbol of Chicago until the Bean took over—was too weird for most Chicagoans at the time. The best Mayor Richard J. Daley could offer upon its dedication was a “belief that what is strange to us today will be familiar tomorrow.” Or as soon as it wins us a Super Bowl.

While Picasso and the Punky QB ultimately became our familiar, Chicago has never warmed up to the Thompson Center. All of the negative sentiments over the years are culminating in Gov. Bruce Rauner’s current interest in selling the building. Pressed for his aesthetic view of it, the best Rauner could muster was, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” [Pearson].

Even before I moved to Chicago, I thought the building was amazing. After seeing Running Scared in 1986, I had two thoughts: I was surer than ever that I
wanted to move to Chicago, and I had to see the building where that final shootout took place. When I did move here three years later, my Greyhound bus arrived at the terminal just a couple of blocks away. As I took in the sights of my new city, the State of Illinois Center was front and center.

The sight of it will always be beautiful to me. Strange and familiar.
Works Cited


