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A Critique of the Language Employed in the Design of the State of Illinois Office Building

Stanley Tigerman



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A distinct odor of controversy has wafted about Helmut Jahn's Chicago office building for the State of Illinois since its inception. Political issues, construction cost overruns, arguments about contextualism, and appropriateness have been among the criteria by which this stigmatic presence continues to be measured. Even the building's high school "pom-pom" cheerleader color scheme has raised hackles on Chicago's self-anointed taste gurus. However, it is in the area of language that critics have been strangely silent—the language of architecture, if you will—and it is considerations in this area, I believe, that are crucial to understanding this apparently alien object since it landed here from an architectural planet different from the one to which we are more normally accustomed.

There are two different paradigms that can be employed to help one comprehend the State of Illinois Center: the first one is that traditional model of state capitols throughout the United States, and the second is the conventional mixed-use office building. It is reasonable to submit that Jahn's project is a hybridization, since the building has the functions and symbols of both paradigms.

In comparing the Illinois building with other, similar edifices, clearly the grand, central space establishing the locus of state capitols authored early in this century by American architects trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts was influential on Jahn's understanding of the ennobling

7 Glass skin at atrium entry.
Photograph by James R. Steinkamp.

possibilities intrinsic to such spaces. By conceiving a great central court, or atrium, bounded by state functions, Jahn suggests the kind of heroic feeling apparent in all such buildings, from Hadrian's Pantheon in first-century Rome to Kahn's late twentieth-century Bangladesh Parliament building in Dacca. Conventionally conceived in that sense, Jahn's space enjoys so many precedents of this type to make one wonder if there is not something other than the building's spatiality that annoys so many people.

Perhaps what galls most people is the mixed-use concept for a public building in which civic functions are blended with a Western-style capitalistic retail presence. Certainly, the glitzy way in which retail shops are presented suggests so much importance to commodities as to infer a suppression of the very presence of the state itself. After all, the Ford Foundation's quiet dignity is reinforced by the way in which offices flank that particular atrium (of course, there is no sign of intrusive retail shops to take one's mind away from the stately presence of an eleemosynary operation). Just as the Chicago park district's loathing of any sign of commerciality in the green swath bordering our inland sea precludes the presence of retail activity on its arcadian edge, perhaps we have been trained to be revulsed by the sign of potential profit making connected with any of our preconceptions about noble gatherings, be they in the park or attached to the state.

It may be that the unconventional way in which the building is massed—and detailed (perhaps Jahn will discover that it is not a good idea to bring cheap materials to earth so that they can be kicked and dented as if one were in an architectural used car lot)—disrupts our sensibilities so much as to create a common angst about this building. After all, we have such an overwhelming gridiron tradition in Chicago (both on our land and imprinted on the facade of our buildings [the skeleton frame of both Chicago schools, that is]) that the presence of an object so blatantly disrupting both the frame is very likely to evoke feelings of loathing toward the author of such an intrusive presence.

The fact is that the State of Illinois building is actually quite conventional insofar as it is so solidly embedded in both ancient and recent traditions. It is also optimistic in that it is not so steeped in tradition as to suggest any sense of a loss of innocence in its presence. It may be declass , but who would suggest that either the City of Chicago or the State of Illinois politics is anything to the contrary? It may be glitzy (certainly its color is not to my particular taste), but think about the terminally boring, dirt-gray albeit tasteful alternatives conventionally employed in any other metropolitan building in recent Chicago tradition.

It is amazing that the Illinois body politic commissioned and then approved this strange lump of a

building, and to its credit, the resulting structure suggests that indeed there is hope for some kind of a future after all. The building's obviously contrived form is, after all, essentially "American" insofar as hybridization is a peculiarly American design methodology; it just goes a bit farther than contemporary taste can quickly adjust to, thus, the state of anxiety connected with the object in question. But, with that anxiety is also a state of joy attached to a future that portends hope as opposed to the better-known government pragmatism. That whim and wit can find their way into an agenda connected with public building suggests that an Orwellian option is not yet upon us. Given Chicago's gritty way of aging our most colorful buildings, even the pom-pom palette will no doubt turn dull in time. Too bad, in a way.