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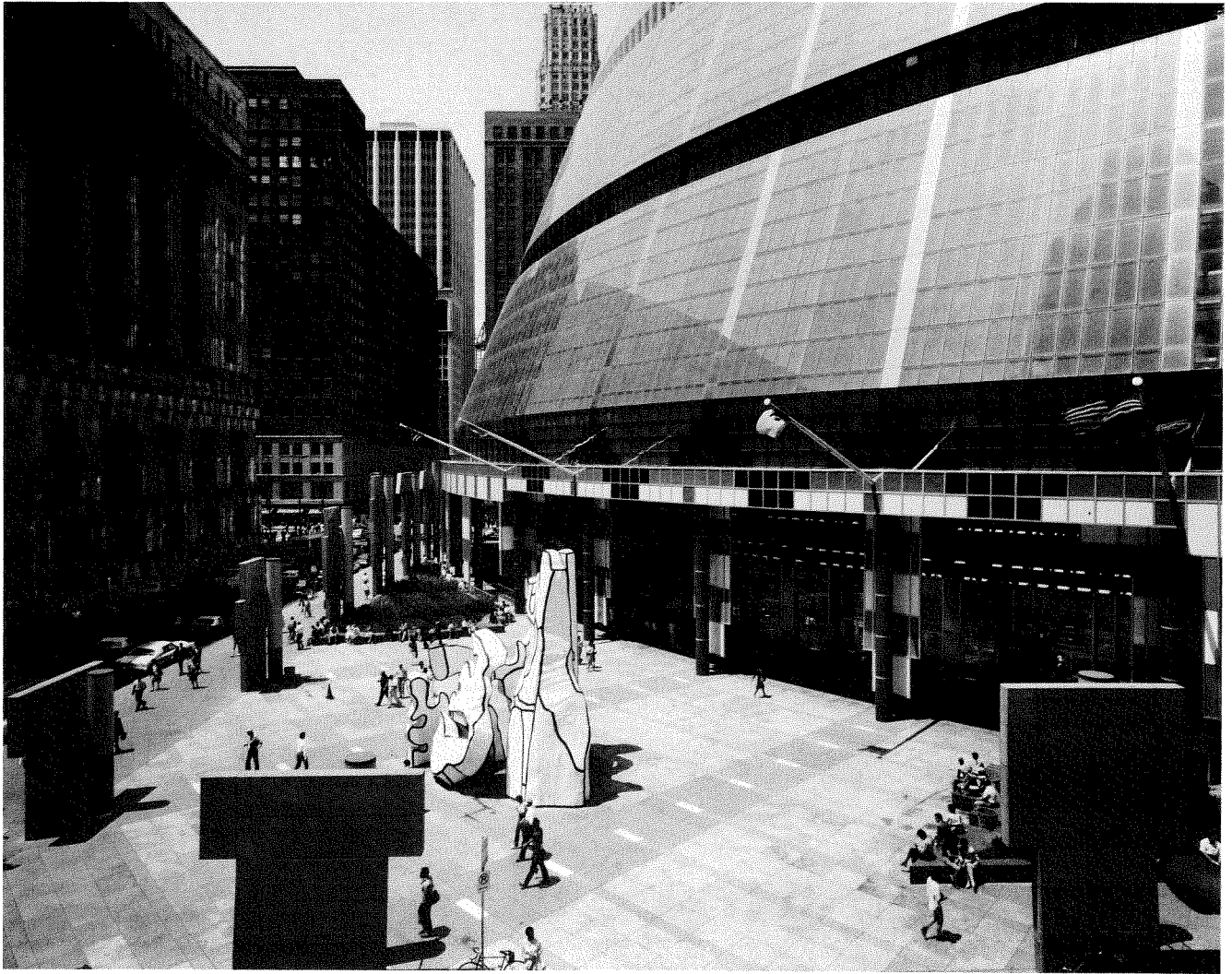


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Juke Box Serenade

Allan Jacobs



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4 Entry Plaza.

Photograph by James R. Steinkamp.

I came upon the new State of Illinois Center in Chicago while taking a walk during a break in a conference. Actually, I had seen it from a distance a few hours earlier in a taxi and wondered what it was, perhaps some new athletic facility or performance hall of one sort or another mixed with an office development. The round shape and sloping walls may have generated that response.

Now, however, I was experiencing the State Street Mall, or whatever it's called, I was disappointed: just some trees on one side, then some trees on the other; no strong use of landscape; a little bit of this and that. I might have expected such a design in a small city (but then Iowa City has done its own central streets so very well), not in Chicago, a big, tough, wonderful city, or on "State Street, that great street. . . ."

Walking on, or just off of, State Street I saw, again, what I was to learn was the State of Illinois and thought I should find out just what it was, expecting to see, somehow, a marquee and ticket booths and posters announcing coming events. I couldn't see what was inside, so I walked in. It's not an athletic facility, but maybe it is a performance hall.

I thought then, and think now, that it is a strange building. At first I was confused. Where do you walk to get to where you might want to go? How would you get around on the different floors if you worked there? Despite the apparent

obvious flow, there seemed to be confusion. Perhaps it was just my vantage point, or maybe it was all the lights and uneven reflections. Does the circulation work? There seemed so many ins and outs and separate pieces. The confusion was not just one of orientation; it was sensuous as well, so much shine and glitter and glitz, so stylish, so of-the-moment. But then, most of the clothes I buy aren't stylish. Most of them I can wear for a few years; not all, but most. Won't a space and materials and detailing like this be out of fashion soon? Maybe not, but maybe.

Along with the glitter there is a sense of thinness and fragility. Over time, who will maintain and wash all the windows that surround the lobby (and more) and polish all the shiny surfaces. Those surfaces have to be shiny, always. It's like a black Alfa Romeo Spider Veloce. Dust is its greatest enemy. How vulnerable, I wonder, is this state office building?

Overall, being in that lobby made me think of being inside of a transparent 1950s jukebox.

Outside, the paper-thin impressions continue. Why the thin false walls in front of the circular columns, as if to separate the facade from the structure and show that how it's done is a great virtue. But, more important, why this building shape? How does it relate to the grid of streets? What does it gain from or give to, its surroundings? Why all the activity, the restaurants, the shops, on the inside? What is

there for the street or the space? Maybe the site is too big, or maybe the building could have been lower (God forbid!) and used more of the site. What spaces are created outside? None of the answers, in positive terms, were, or are, apparent to me.

It is a big building. It does gain attention.

I walked across to Murphy's civic center building, the one with the Picasso sculpture and the large plaza in front. Rain started, then stopped. It was getting on to late afternoon of an early spring day. That building and that space and the building across from it seemed so solid and strong and right. That's a bit of a surprise. I would have thought I would want more activity and animation.