

Bellow and the Thompson Center

In the first week of October 1976—it was that long ago—I arrived in Chicago and began work as a wire service reporter at the Chicago Board of Trade. I was living then in a two-bedroom apartment at Irving Park and the Inner Drive, and I took bus number 151 across the North Side of the city and down LaSalle St. to the exchange. I think the commute took about forty minutes. On my way home, the 151 passed a handful of two-story limestone buildings between Lake St. and Randolph on the east side of LaSalle, very ordinary looking. One of them was leased by Laurie's Records, a retail shop with one of the better collections of classical recordings in the city. I began visiting the store on Friday afternoons, after work, and I was there on that evening in February 1977 when an L train came off the tracks and went into the intersection of Wabash and Lake, just about four blocks away. I didn't hear the accident happen, but I certainly remember the aftermath, when the Loop was assailed by wailing squad cars and ambulances that raced to the street. I remember seeing a young priest run past the store and down to the scene of the accident. Subway cars were dangling from the tracks and lying in the intersection

. At the record store, though, it was business as usual. The staff knew its classical music, and one of its members, a friendly young guy about my age named Bronstein, claimed to be a remote descendant of Lev Davidovich Bronstein, i.e., Trotsky. One evening we left the store together and went back to my place to listen to an old recording of Beethoven's Ninth.

These memories returned to me recently because of the likely transformation of that corner of the Loop. Those stores on LaSalle St. were torn down in the early eighties, and the state, which acquired the land, commissioned the architect Helmut Jahn to design what ultimately came to be called the Thompson Center. (Jahn died in a cycling accident in May 2021.) It opened in the spring of 1985. But I think of the building in another connection, because

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it appears briefly in *More Die of Heartbreak*, Saul Bellow's novel from 1987. His distaste for the building is clear. He calls it a "gargantuan glass pregnancy," which seems apt—it has a circular structure made up of panels of glass, forming what Bellow calls a "curvilinear, bulging glitter," along with a huge atrium on the ground floor. Bellow makes it a skyscraper with over fifty stories, but in fact the Thompson Center has only seventeen. "You believed in eternity when you saw a skyscraper like this," the narrator of the novel says, "if only for the comfort there might be in the thought that such a structure couldn't last forever. It *had* to come down at last." After offering a description of the building's interior which is no less unflattering, the narrator concludes that "some of the wild genes of the younger Breughel or Hieronymus Bosch must have flared up in the architect."

Bellow's disapproval is perhaps fed by a parole board hearing held there in 1985. I've described the event in a previous essay, "Bellow and Governor Thompson," and I won't repeat what I wrote there. I'll only say here that it concerned the prison term meted out to Gary Dotson for the rape of Cathleen Crowell Webb—a rape that never took place. Webb recanted her claims years after the event—hence the parole board hearing—and if law enforcement had any doubts of Dotson's innocence, they were settled by DNA evidence that was presented by his lawyers three years after the hearing. In the novel, the characters are renamed Sickie and Danae Cusper, and the stand-in for Governor Thompson is Governor Stewart. Bellow, or the narrator of his novel, assumes that Sickie, the character, is indeed guilty of the crime and deserves to be locked away. In the novel he is set free.

The Dotson parole board hearing took place just after the building had opened, and at the time I was attending a seminar at the University of Chicago that was taught by Bellow and Allan Bloom. The parole board had met publicly the weekend before our class, and I can still

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remember our instructors beginning the session by asking us, with some incredulity, if we had followed its proceedings on TV. In the novel, Jim Thompson emerges as a grotesque figure, who with questionable legitimacy takes over a parole hearing for publicity purposes and stages a disgusting spectacle, a kind of sex revue for the public masquerading as an examination of evidence. That was why our instructors queried the class.

These hearings took place (to repeat) in the Thompson Center. And what interests me now is that Bellow seems on the verge of getting his wish, which could come far short of whatever we understand by eternity. Less than forty years after it went up, causing the demise of my favorite record store, the building is threatened with demolition itself. The current governor of Illinois, J.B. Pritzker, is not a fan of the facility, and the state, which owns it, is close to selling it. The state began accepting bids for the property in the spring of 2021, and announced a few weeks ago that it had narrowed down its selection to a pair of competing ones. It is expected to choose one or the other by the end of the year.

Preservationists, not surprisingly, advocate saving the Thompson Center, and it's possible they'll have their way. In a post-pandemic world, there may be no point in replacing it. So many people have gotten use to working from home that the need for office space is not what it once was. But the building has also had serious heating and ventilation problems. These were noticed almost immediately after it opened, and the press reports a "deferred maintenance" bill of \$325 million. In fact, the state has been relocating personnel from the Thompson Center to other sites nearby. In March, the alderman for the ward the building sits in proposed a zoning change that would greatly expand the space allowed for the site. The City and the state are eager for tax revenue, and the proposal cleared the City Council by a unanimous vote in May. Chicago has certainly never lacked for developers with huge ambitions, and the ambiguities of post-pandemic

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life notwithstanding, there is talk of a large skyscraper going up where the Thompson Center now stands.

If the building is demolished, the new owner is not likely to replace it with two-story buildings for small retailers. I doubt that Bellow would have been surprised by much of this. His fiction—the last page of *Dangling Man*, for example, and the story “Looking for Mr. Green”—considers the transformations that overtake Chicago all the time. Here is how he ends a short essay on the city that was published in 1983:

Walking on LeMoyne Street, looking for the house that the Bellow family lived in half a century ago, I find only a vacant lot. Stepping over the rubble, I picture the rooms overhead. There is only emptiness around, not a sign of the old life. Nothing. But it's just as well, perhaps, that there should be nothing physical to hang on to. It forces you inward, to look for what endures. Give Chicago half a chance, and it will turn you into a philosopher.

Sources: Bellow, Saul. “Chicago: The City that Was, the City that Is.” *It All Adds Up*, The Penguin Group, New York. 1994.

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