

Google Provides First Look at Plans for Chicago's Thompson Center

Tech Giant Unveils Renderings 18 Months After Striking Deal To Buy Downtown Building



Google said it plans to begin work soon on a major redevelopment of the James R. Thompson Center office building in Chicago's Loop business district. (Google)

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About 18 months after striking a deal to buy the futuristic James R. Thompson Center in Chicago, Google is providing a first look at its vision for the Helmut Jahn-designed office

building in the heart of the Loop business district that calls for major upgrades to its highly visible windows and ground floor area.

The company on Wednesday provided the first new details about the plan since summer 2022, including renderings showing how the Thompson Center will look after a major overhaul is completed.

Karen Sauder, Google's leader in Chicago, disclosed the new details in a blog post accompanied by the images. They show the elements of Jahn's quirky blue-and-salmon color scheme giving way to more of a transparent, clear-glass look in which one of the Jahn design's signature features — a towering atrium through the center of the building — is clearly seen from outside.

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The building's facade and internal systems will be completely replaced, Sauder said. New triple-pane glass exterior windows will make the property less costly to heat and cool, addressing one of the building's biggest shortcomings.

Google also plans to replace the covered colonnade at the base of the tower in a redesign that will “allow for an enhanced ground floor experience, including opportunities for more food and beverage retail and seasonal activations of the plaza” that surround the building, Sauder said.

The redesign also will include creating covered terraces along three levels of the southeast perimeter of the building, according to the post.

Sauder said design changes are being made with input from the architecture firm left behind by the German-born, Chicago-based Jahn, who died in 2021 when he was struck by two vehicles while riding a bicycle in the Chicago suburbs.

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“We look forward to stewarding the Thompson Center into the 21st century while preserving the iconic architectural form,” Sauder said. “These types of improvements take several years to complete; we’re excited about what this project symbolizes for the greater Chicago community and will share more about our plans in the future.”

Signs of construction will become visible early next year when fencing is set to go up around the wide building, Sauder said.

The post by Sauder represents the first new details publicly released by Google since the Mountain View, California-based tech giant in July 2022 acknowledged plans to buy the 17-story structure and use it for a new downtown office.

That came about a month after CoStar News first reported that Google was in talks to buy the formerly state-owned structure [at 100 W. Randolph St.](#)

Cost, Timeline Unknown

Sauder’s post does not include several key details, including a specific timeline or cost of the project, when employees are expected to move in, and how many of them will be based in the building.

The company declined to comment to CoStar News beyond Sauder’s post.

A major investment by one of the world’s most recognizable companies is seen as a boost to the Loop, which like other city centers is grappling with high vacancy in office buildings as employers let workers adopt remote and hybrid work schedules. That has exacerbated a trend of companies moving out of older Loop buildings for new towers along the Chicago River and in the Fulton Market district, a movement that began before COVID-19.



Google has provided a look at its vision for a redevelopment of the James R. Thompson Center in Chicago's Loop business district. (Google)

Along with historically low office demand, rising interest rates, a dearth of available loans and other factors have contributed to a [drought of major downtown office sales](#). There hasn't been a sale of more than \$50 million since the July 2022 day when Chicago developers Prime Group and Capri Investment Group bought three buildings, including the Thompson Center for \$105 million.

As part of that unusual deal, also involving the state of Illinois, the venture led by Mike Reschke's Prime Group bought the Thompson Center [and two nearby buildings](#), flipping one of them to the state as part of the \$105 million payment for the Thompson Center.

The state took ownership of the office building at 115 S. LaSalle St., where the state has been moving workers from the Thompson Center in phases.

Reschke's firm previously had agreed to buy the Thompson Center from the state and redevelop it for tenants that would lease space from his venture before Google's interest later emerged.

Google has an agreement to buy the Thompson Center after the current owners finish initial phases of a large-scale redevelopment of the 1.2 million-square-foot building, a process that Google says will lead to the 38-year-old building being an all-electric, LEED Platinum property.

Interest by Reschke's firm, and later by Google, ended a yearslong effort by the state to sell the building. It also saved the building from the wrecking ball after the state previously marketed it as a potential teardown to create a massive development in the center of the city.

Potential for Consolidation

Google now leases space in buildings west of the Loop in the Fulton Market district, an area that serves as the company's Midwest headquarters. The company has not said whether it

will maintain those spaces after the full renovation of the Thompson Center, which is large enough for potentially thousands of employees.

Plans released Wednesday by Google look significantly different than preliminary designs that Reschke [unveiled in December 2021](#).

Preservation groups and architecture buffs have criticized that plan, including the blandness of the reworked atrium, while worrying that too much of the original structure would be demolished as part of a redevelopment.



Google's newly released plans for a redevelopment of Chicago's Thompson Center differ significantly from those presented by Chicago developer Mike Reschke, shown here, in late 2021. (City of Chicago)

Architecture advocates also have publicly pushed for Google to preserve the towering atrium as a public gathering area.

Sauder's post hints at continued public access, including plans for new retail and unspecified improvements for riders on Chicago Transit Authority train lines that are directly connected to the building, but she did not specify how much of the building will be accessible to non-Google employees. She also did not provide details about improvements to the multilevel train station connected to the structure.

“When it opened, the Thompson Center was intended to be a new kind of gathering space for Chicagoans,” Sauder said. “After all, it’s the only building in the city where six L train lines converge — connecting Chicago’s South, West and North sides.

“With a new and improved CTA experience, the Thompson Center will continue to serve commuters and will be perfectly positioned to welcome current and future employees from every corner of Chicago. And our hope is that this reimagined building becomes something more: a thriving community destination for all Chicagoans in a revitalized Loop neighborhood.”

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