Helmut Jahn (b. 1940)
*Axonometric Rendering of Northwestern Atrium Center, Madison and Canal Streets, Chicago* (now Citicorp Center), 1982.
Airbrushed ink on resin-coated paper
Anonymous gift, 1982.629

German-born Helmut Jahn came to the United States in 1966 to study at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where a philosophy of design based on that of Mies van der Rohe still reigned. But the distinctive style Jahn developed incorporates an inventive, even playful, use of color, materials, light, and structural form. As a designer and then as director of design and planning for C.F. Murphy Associates, and, finally, since 1982, as president and chief executive officer of Murphy/Jahn, the architect demonstrates in his work a sensitivity to historical references, symbolism, and building context, as well as to both the rational and intuitive aspects of design.

This rendering depicts the fluid setbacks of his Northwestern Atrium Center, completed in 1987, which rises above a grand entrance arch that recalls the work of Adler and Sullivan (see *Medallion*, slide 12). The skyscraper’s mass of cascading glass has suggested to some viewers an immense jukebox of the 1950s, while others have seen in it allusions to the 1920s and 1930s streamlined locomotives that pulled in and out of the train station before it was demolished to make way for Jahn’s skyscraper. This drawing for the office building is an axonometric view, which shows both elevation and plan of the
highrise and new train station, with tracks zooming off into the
distance. Typical of Jahn’s presentation renderings, the drawing is
large in scale (72 x 40 in.), dramatic in composition, and deliberately
airbrushed with transparent layers of color. (SRM, The Art Institute of
Chicago: The Essential Guide)

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Helmut Jahn has designed a number of buildings in Chicago in
recent years: Xerox Center (1978 - 80); One South Wacker (1981 -
83); Northwestern Atrium (1979 - 87); The State of Illinois Building
(1979 - 85); 120 N. LaSalle Street (1989 - 91); and United Airlines
Terminal at O’Hare Airport (1983 - 87). Have students read
about/visit one of the sites. What can they learn about Jahn’s
designs? His use/creation of space? His choice of materials? His
historic and cultural references? What function does each building
serve and how did its intended function influence all of the above
decisions that Jahn made?

2. Northwestern Atrium demonstrates Jahn’s sensitivity to historical
references, symbolism, and building context. Its entrance arch
recalls the work of Adler and Sullivan while its facade is suggestive
of a 1950s jukebox or a streamlined locomotive from the 1920s and
1930s.

Have students find a building in their community or city with
historical or cultural references. Can they identify the source(s)?
How are they used and what relationship, if any, do they have to the function of the building that the students have selected?

3. What is an atrium? When were atriums first designed and used? How is Northwestern Atrium Center used today? By how many people daily? annually? Where do these people come from and where are they going? What can this information tell students about living/working in the Chicago area in the 1990s?