December 4, 2019

Members of AIA Silicon Valley
c/o AIA Silicon Valley chapter office
325 S. 1st St. #100
San Jose, CA 95113

RE: Demolition of Cesar Pelli’s Bank of California Bldg., City View Plaza, San Jose

Dear Silicon Valley AIA Members,

As longtime architects serving the South Bay, we are writing on behalf of the Preservation Action Council of San Jose (PAC*SJ) to bring your attention to our concerns for the fate of a building we feel is of historic significance to San Jose.

The Bank of California Building (aka Family Court) at the northwest corner of Park Ave. and Almaden Blvd. has been credited to César Pelli, designed in 1971 during his tenure at Gruen and Associates in Los Angeles. In the late 1960’s when San José’s City Planning and Redevelopment Agency was undertaking urban renewal projects, Victor Gruen and Associates was invited to San Jose to lead in the design of Park Center Plaza.

The current owners of City View Plaza (formerly Park Center Plaza) are proposing a new 24-story mixed-use project for the area and as part of that project the César Pelli building would be demolished. The project is currently undergoing an SEIR review by the city to study among other things the impact of the proposed demolition.

In the historic evaluation prepared for the EIR, the Historic Consultants concluded that the building was worthy of landmark status under several of the Secretary of the Interiors Standards criteria. A summary of the building’s importance concluded:

“The Bank of California building is an exceptional regional example of Cesar Pelli’s acclaimed body of early work. The building embodies the stylistic elements of his work that can be found in critical studies and books on contemporary architects and the architecture of our time. The building is a sophisticate example of the architectural design that represents in a distinctive way a specific era of development in San Jose’s history.”
This 1970’s building, designed in a Brutalist style popular with progressive architects at the time, features many of Pelli’s pronounced signature elements. It has an abstract form with angular geometric planes of smooth concrete and ribbon windows organized along a central spine. The folded planes of the building - composed of horizontal, angled, and vertical surfaces or voids - serve to frame large geometric masses. The building comes together as an abstract sculptural form that does not directly reveal the design of the interior space that lies within. It’s easy to dismiss this building at first glance, but on further study it’s a genuinely fine work of period architecture.

Just as Victorian architecture went out of fashion, to be followed by Arts and Crafts, (and other movements or styles such as Eichler’s), the Modernist or Brutalist style represents a unique period of architectural design in the mid-late 20th century. We have very few examples as fine as this from that architectural movement, and we do not have other examples of Pelli’s work in our city. For these reasons we are reaching out to the architectural community to help acknowledge the importance of this building and Pelli’s work here in San Jose. We are appealing to the City of San Jose to enact measures that will preserve it.
When asked, Cal SHPO stated that the building is likely eligible for National Register listing under Criterion A for its association with a certain phase or history of San Jose’s development. Under Criterion C, it is likely eligible because it embodies the distinctive characteristics of Brutalist Architecture and as the work of Master Architect César Pelli.

For 30 years the Preservation Action Council has been advocating for a more thoughtful approach to the development of our city, one that respects the creativity of past architects while encouraging the innovations of our contemporary ones. We envision a city where superior design is carefully woven into the fabric of our rich architectural heritage.

Through our efforts, historic buildings such as the San Jose Theatre, The Montgomery Hotel, Mark’s Hot Dog stand, the Scheller house and many other unique examples of historic architecture have been saved as viable assets for the community. Our city is richer for it, though sadly we have lost many exquisitely designed historic buildings to development or unnecessary neglect.

For example, a number of years ago while working to save the 1957 IBM 25 building on Cottle Road, the building was needlessly lost to fire. Designed by John Bolles, this innovative minimalist building was described as a precursor to the modern high-tech campus. Before that, efforts to save the Weir office building, an exemplary piece of Wrightian Organic architecture designed by Aaron Green, was deemed unworthy of keeping. In earlier days Julia Morgan’s YWCA building was taken down. It is sobering to think how much culturally richer this city would be if these buildings were still influencing our built environment.

We at PAC*SJ realize that for a vibrant community to thrive, modern development must continue. We also understand that for various reasons not every historic building can be saved. However, we have an opportunity and an obligation to save those buildings that do matter - those that represent a pivotal period in the development of our city.

We stand before another uniquely historic period in San Jose when proposed multi-story developments that are destined to change the landscape of our city are now coming at an unprecedented pace. What will the architectural legacy of our city be?

We imagine a city where the architectural stock is rich with examples of superb historical heritage, standing as shining examples of our artistic values. World renowned cities have buildings that are designed by master architects. Our standing as a world class city rises with this rich heritage and so goes the standing of our contemporary architects. We are oftentimes better for what we choose to keep rather than replace. Let’s not diminish our stock.

We see the César Pelli Bank of California building holding a prominent place alongside the Center for the Performing Arts (Taliesin Assoc.), The Tech and Children’s Discovery
buildings (Ricardo Legorreta), and the 1936 Montgomery Theater (Binder & Curtis), as a
city center district with a rich legacy of beautifully crafted buildings from varying periods
in our storied history. We would love to see the new City View Plaza project continue to
contribute to this legacy in a thoughtful way.

We urge you to support our efforts to save this superb example of period Architecture by
renowned Architect César Pelli.

Sincerely,

John Tabuena-Frolli, AIA                     Jose de la Cruz
Historic Architect                        Architect/Consultant
PAC*SJ Director                          PAC*SJ Director

Interested AIA members please contact PAC*SJ Directors’ John Frolli, AIA
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