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April 18, 2020

Honorable Mayor Sam Liccardo
San Jose City Council Members
c/o Toni Taber - City Clerk
toni.taber@sanjoseca.gov
City of San Jose
200 E Santa Clara Street
San Jose CA 95113

Dear Mayor Liccardo:

I am writing to express my support for the Park Plaza landmark nomination.

Office and commercial buildings from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s are now being recognized nationally for their urban and historic significance, just as Beaux Arts and Art Deco buildings from the '20s and '30s have been in the past. Unfortunately, these more recent buildings are especially vulnerable at this time. This is why the landmark designation is so critical. We now value the unique character that once-threatened buildings like the Bank of America Building and the Hotel De Anza bring to the unique identity and livability of downtown San Jose. The buildings of Park Plaza are equally important.

In an era when sustainability and energy conservation are more important than ever before, a city looking to the future must value the adaptive reuse of existing buildings, and the conservation of the embodied energy which those buildings represent.

In particular, I would like to note some of the reasons why Park Plaza is historically significant. Its architects and planners, Skidmore Owings & Merrill, and Victor Gruen Associates were nationally influential firms. Gruen, for example, was one of the predominant architecture and planning firms in the mid century era, responsible for defining the suburban shopping mall, and for revitalizing declining city centers. Of course, "declining" was the unfortunate reality of downtown San Jose in that era, and Park Plaza's office towers, landscaped plazas, and commercial buildings exemplify both Gruen's and SOM's response at the time.

I would also like to draw attention to the 1971 Bank of California building by Gruen Assoc. in the complex. It is attributed to Gruen's chief of design, Cesar

Pelli, who of course went on to become one of the most important global architects of the last 40 years. Landmarking this commercial building with which he is associated recognizes the high level of architectural quality for which San Jose was striving.

Pelli's involvement with this building is important to consider in assessing this nomination. Pelli was one of my professors at the UCLA School of Architecture, so I have followed his career for many decades. It is important to note that design in a large firm like Gruen is always a collaborative effort. According to a close Pelli associate, Fred Clarke, this is true about the Bank of California building. In my opinion, Pelli's hand can be seen in this building's distinguished proportions and details. They echo ideas seen in his other works in this period, including the Teledyne campus and the Pacific Design Center in Southern California.

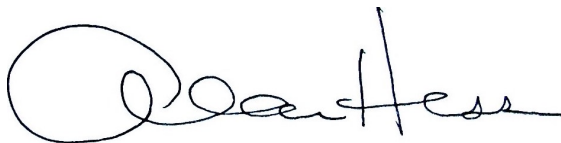
Other early works by this important architect, including the San Bernardino City Hall, are currently threatened. Thus it is all the more important for San Jose to recognize the legacy of this important architect in shaping California architecture in this period.

I am an architect, historian, and author of twenty books on twentieth century architecture and urbanism. I also serve as Commissioner on the California State Historical Resources Commission, though the opinions expressed here are my own and not the Commission's.

As the former architecture critic for the *San Jose Mercury News*, I have tracked the development of downtown San Jose since the 1980s. I have seen several architecturally distinguished buildings disappear because they were not considered significant at the time — for example, the Pestana building at First and San Carlos, and the Weir Law Offices by Frank Lloyd Wright associate Aaron Green, on Julian St. They were lost at a time when they were considered unimportant and dispensable. Only later were they recognized as valuable. This emphasizes how important it is to assess Park Plaza deliberately and carefully, and not to dismiss it because it is considered "out of fashion" at the moment.

Thank you for your consideration of these issues. The quality San Jose's downtown depends on retaining the unique character which Park Plaza and other historic buildings bring to the city.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan Hess". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "A" and "H".

Alan Hess

cc: Historic Landmarks Commission, Andre Luthard, Ben Leech, Preservation
Action Council of San Jose