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Letter in Support of the Landmarking of Cesar Pelli's Park Plaza Building in San Jose

Evaluating Cesar Pelli's Park Plaza Building for landmark status is not as simple a task as one might think.

Yes, its visual character is striking, its functional history is impressive (accommodating several banks and a courthouse at various times), and its author was remarkably accomplished. Located on four continents, his works are deservedly celebrated for both their intellectual rigor and their sculptural grace.

What complicates the issue is that Park Plaza, despite its virtues, does not offer the comfortable familiarity that one might expect from a Pelli building. It has no formal or stylistic predecessors in his expansive portfolio, and doesn't seem to point to (or even hint at) any new directions. It is an extreme outlier, a road not taken.

Consequently, the Park Plaza Building is one of the least known of this highly prolific architect's products. It isn't discussed, illustrated, or even mentioned in either of the two standard monographs on his early work, or the definitive guidebook to northern California architecture. These three volumes total more than a thousand pages.

Despite a nearly half-century-long history of exploring and writing about Pelli's work, and despite living about a mile from Park Plaza for about fifteen years, I first consciously laid eyes on it only within the last year. My first reaction was that any purported Pelli involvement with this design was simply an urban legend. I thought it unrefined and unworthy of his imprimatur, and resolved to set the record straight. I phoned him and asked whether he really did design Park Plaza, fully expecting him to say no. Instead, he cheerfully confirmed his involvement, saying that "it was a quickie" batted out over two weekends in 1971 as a favor for a developer friend. In retrospect, it is a demonstration of the breadth of expression that marked his early formative years.

Over the last year, my opinion of this design has steadily risen as I realized that I had been harboring stylistic preconceptions rather than accepting it on its own terms. Part of this stemmed from Pelli's uncharacteristic choice of material and style. His cladding of choice at the time was a tightly stretched, subtly reflective glass skin, celebrating lightness and volume. In contrast, Park Plaza seems to be Pelli's only clear-cut essay in Brutalism, a dramatic exposed-concrete style that stressed solidity and power. It took the architectural world by storm starting in the third quarter of the twentieth century before falling out of favor, especially among the general public. Interest in the style has revived in the last two decades or so, less as a literal model for contemporary design, and more as a historical style to be studied, visited and appreciated by architecture buffs.

Pelli's interpretation of Brutalism was subtly unconventional. Its massing was vigorous and its walls nearly windowless, yet the building somehow managed to be a bit less ponderous than most exemplars of the style, since it also had a certain simplicity, crispness, and lack of dogmatism rarely found in its muscle-bound peers.

There may be some deeply subliminal humor lurking in the massing of Park Place. Recently, some preservationists privately began calling it The Sphinx Building -- at this point no one can remember who said it first. The epithet is uncannily fitting. Seen from the southeast, south, or southwest, it doesn't take much imagination to envision a large prone animal with extended front legs and paws, an upraised head, and a royal headdress. Now, whenever I look at the building, I can't help seeing a crisp-edged abstract image of a sphinx persisting like a tune stuck in one's head. And to add to the coincidence, the San Jose Sphinx's dimensions are similar to those of Giza. Both are 66 feet high, and both are a bit longer than 200 feet. Popularly nicknamed buildings are not as common as they should be, so a San

Jose Sphinx should be as welcome here as The Blue Whale (Pacific Design Center) is in Los Angeles.

To return to the original topic: should The Sphinx be landmarked, and why? A prime reason is rarity -- rarity within Pelli's body of work, and rarity within the region. Another is architectural and urban design diversity. Downtown San Jose is steadily turning into a monoculture of blocky mid-sized corporate expression and preserving this eccentric little building would provide some sorely needed spatial, functional, and temporal leavening.

Landmark Park Plaza not because it is famous, but rather because it is virtually unknown. Approve it not for any refinement or polish it may possess, but for regional uniqueness, risk-taking, boldness, and intellectual courage. Approve it for its quirkiness, and unflagging energy. Revive its place in local architectural culture and in community history.

About John Pastier:

Author of the first monograph on Cesar Pelli. (Cesar Pelli, Monographs in Contemporary Architecture, Whitney Library of Design, 1980.)

Co-author of the second monograph on Cesar Pelli. (Cesar Pelli, Buildings and Projects, 1965-1990, Rizzoli, 1990.)

Founding architecture critic, Los Angeles Times.

Author of more than 500 articles, essays and book chapters, for general-interest and professional publications, on architecture, urban design, historic preservation, design competitions, and baseball stadiums.

Taught architecture at UC-Berkeley, UCLA, UT-Austin, McGill, and several other universities.

Expert witness for the city of Chicago regarding landmark status for Wrigley Field.

Recipient of local, state, and national awards and fellowships.

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