



July 8, 2020

Suzanne Segur,
Historical Resources Department
City of San Diego
SSegur@sandiego.gov

Dear Ms. Segur:

I write to you as an expert on the public art and architecture of the Millard Sheets Studio and author of the award-winning *Banking on Beauty: Millard Sheets and Midcentury Commercial Architecture in California* (University of Texas Press, 2018). I urge you to protect the building at 4650 Mission Bay Drive, the only Home Savings and Loan art and architecture in the city of the San Diego, under Historical Resources Board Designation Criteria A and C, and under the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and Public Resources Code section 21001, which requires agencies to “take all action necessary to provide the people of this state” with “enjoyment of aesthetic ... scenic, and historic environmental qualities.”

Millard Sheets Studio artworks have been recognized formally as landmarks in Beverly Hills, and preservation projects in Montebello and Pasadena have been lauded by city residents and architectural historians alike. I urge you to build on this recognition and confirm the landmark status of this building. It represents the height of the aesthetics of the Sheets Studio commissions for Home Savings, integrating architecture, mosaic, stained glass, sculptures, and interior design elements into an indivisible whole, all in the service of depicting the historical significance of San Diego.

In a series of oral histories recorded in 1976-1977 and preserved at UCLA, Millard Sheets spoke about his artistic method with particular reference to this building. In response to the question “Are there any other Home Savings buildings we should mention as being particularly intriguing?,” Sheets offered that “We’re doing a very, very exciting job in San Diego right now,” and explained the method, saying: “We just don't do rectangles, we do vignettes; we do all sorts of things to fit into the building and on the building. Then I discuss with myself the best subject matter for that building in that particular locale. Now we're working a great deal in northern California and central California and down in San Diego and all over the state, which gives us a lot of range in differences of subject matter.”

To research my book, I conducted more than 75 interviews with architects and artists who worked on these buildings, Home Savings employees, and preservationists. I was the first person to comprehensively study the Millard Sheets Papers in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian, Denis O'Connor Papers at the Huntington Library, and Ahmanson Foundation images related to these commissions. I received fellowships from the Ahmanson Foundation, the Haynes Foundation, Howard and Roberta Ahmanson, the Huntington Library, the Jonathan



Heritage Foundation, and the Autry National Center, and I have written about my research for Huntington Library Frontiers, the KCET website, and my own research blog, <http://adamarenson.com/blog>, which has received more than 50,000 visitors.

I have led a tour of Home Savings branches for the Autry's *Pacific Standard Time* Getty Foundation programming, and I coordinated with the L.A. Conservancy on a panel on Sheets's works in the Pomona Valley. I have been interviewed about this research by the *New York Times*, KCRW, the *Daily News Los Angeles*, the *Dallas Morning News*, Beverly Hills Television, and in a documentary by Paul Bockhorst on the Millard Sheets Studio's architecture.

My book was named Best Book on Architecture or Urban Planning at the 2019 PROSE Awards and it received a Citation of Merit in the DOCOMOMO-US 2018 Modernism in America Awards. The DOCOMOMO-US judges noted that "Arenson's research has uncovered an extensive legacy of 'every man modernism' that was largely unknown and under-appreciated, and brings attention to main street architecture with real design value and the impact of individual grassroots efforts."

It was also named one of the best 2018 books on California by the *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Magazine*. Gustavo Arellano wrote in the *Times* that "*Banking on Beauty* invites readers to remember a time when our captains of industry cared about public spaces as much as they did the bottom line – and it also challenges us to preserve those remaining buildings that possess Sheets originals." Chris Nichols wrote in *Los Angeles Magazine* that "Once upon a time, a visit to a department store or a branch bank was a chance to be inspired by fine art. Architects incorporated custom paintings, sculpture, and stained glass into these common buildings in an era of popular luxury....Local history was a favorite subject for enormous mosaic installations on prominent corners throughout the state....This richly illustrated book finally tells their story."

Through that expertise, I am uniquely positioned to speak to the aesthetic, cultural, and historical significance of this building – the craftsmanship of its mosaics, sculpture, and painted mural, and its overall New Formalist architecture – as a vital resource within the city of San Diego. Its loss would be a significant adverse impact that would violate CEQA.

As I have written extensively in my book and on my blog, the art and architecture created by the Millard Sheets Studio – Sheets himself, along with other noted artists in his employ, including mosaicist Denis O'Connor, painter and mosaicist Susan Hertel, sculptor John Edward Svenson, architect Frank Homolka, and – unique to the San Diego location – painter Piilani Garber – constitute a "California Modernism" recognized by Alan Hess and others, that created commercial buildings that engaged the interplay of outdoor and indoor spaces and the power of bold horizontal lines in the California sunshine. While most Midcentury Modern projects were residential, and while many of the better-known New Formalists created towering office buildings, the Sheets Studio created landmark architecture on a human scale, designed, like Google diners, for the new postwar landscape and its automobile culture.

The Sheets Studio also did extensive research to create artwork specific to San Diego, to help Home Savings demonstrate its commitment to the community. The Pacific Beach building includes eight



mosaics, showing key figures in the history of San Diego: Native Americans; Spanish friars and vaqueros; a 49er; and members of the fishing and construction trades; as well as loving images of the San Diego Children's Zoo in Balboa Park and the pleasures of San Diego Harbor, including the Point Loma lighthouse, the Star of India, and Sea World.

The sculpture of a sea lion also reflects the building's location near the coast, while the interior mural reflects Millard Sheets's signature themes – horses, trees, and the California interior – in a mural similar to one destroyed in San Francisco in 2008 and much mourned.

Born and raised in San Diego and a proud product of San Diego City Schools (I was 1996 Patrick Henry High School valedictorian), I earned an A.B. at Harvard in 2001 and a Ph.D. at Yale in 2008, and I am currently the director of the Urban Studies program and a full professor of history at Manhattan College. I am the author of two award-winning books, co-editor of two other books, and the author of numerous academic and popular articles about history, the built environment, and urban studies.

I look forward to hearing from you about your decision, and please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have. I am happy to help my hometown preserve this beloved art and architecture.

Sincerely,

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