

February 6, 2002

Mr. Joseph C. Johns  
Envicom Corporation  
28328 Agoura Road  
Agoura Hills, CA 91301

**RE: ABC Entertainment Center  
2020 - 2040 Avenue of the Stars, Century City, California**

Dear Mr. Johns:

We have prepared this evaluation of the ABC Entertainment Center in Century City to assist with the environmental assessment of the proposed project on the site.

The current project proposes the demolition of the ABC Entertainment Center in Century City, a complex currently developed with office, theater, restaurant, retail, and health club space. These uses are contained within two similar eight-story buildings which flank a sunken plaza and below-grade retail. The building to the north at 2020 Avenue of the Stars contains office uses and the former Shubert Theater, a live theater; the south building at 2040 Avenue of the Stars contains office uses and several cinema auditoriums. A portion of the office space in the south building was occupied by the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) until the company's move to Burbank, California, to the campus of Disney Studios, the new parent company of ABC.

This report provides a brief discussion of the ABC Entertainment Center within several applicable historic contexts and an evaluation of the Center according to local, State, and Federal criteria for historic designation.

### **Century City and the ABC Entertainment Center - Description**

The ABC Entertainment Center is located in Century City, a section of the City of Los Angeles that was master-planned in 1964 to 1966 on 180 acres of land purchased from Fox Studios by the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa). The land was formerly the back lot of Fox Studios, and was a major real estate holding and one of the studio's most valuable assets. The entire Fox holding was a rectangle oriented north-to-south and bounded (using contemporary street names) by Santa Monica Boulevard to the north, Pico Boulevard to the south, Century Park West to the west, and Century Park East to the east.

The parcel was divided into four quadrants by major cross streets, with Olympic bisecting the site from east to west and Avenue of the Stars bisecting it from north to south. The quadrant south of Olympic and west of Avenue of the Stars was retained by Fox and it remains the historic Fox Studios lot. The remaining three quadrants were developed by Alcoa as Century City.

Century City was conceived as a “city within a city,” a 180-acre site master planned by Charles Luckman Associates that would contain high rise office space, high rise and low rise condominium and apartment buildings, a shopping mall, an 800-room hotel, and cultural-entertainment facilities all connected by landscaped boulevards, bridges, and tunnels oriented to pedestrians. The area was originally planned for 12,000 residents and 20,000 workers by Charles Luckman Associates. Among the first buildings developed were the “gateway” buildings flanking the north end of Avenue of the Stars (moderate-rise buildings clad in aluminum panels and glass), the Century Plaza Hotel just north of the center of the cross axis, and residential towers at the south end at Olympic Boulevard. The future ABC Entertainment Center was aligned with the hotel to the west and the future site of the twin office towers to the east. The residential buildings were concentrated in the southeast quadrant, south of Olympic Boulevard.

The portion of Century City planned in the 1960s to contain the “Cultural Center,” among other uses, was a 12-acre site, originally designated Block 8 and eventually named the “Theme Plaza”, occupying six percent of Century City’s acreage. The Theme Plaza was to contain a large office building over fifty stories tall (a significant size in a city where height had been capped at 150 feet (approximately 13 stories) until 1957) towering over an open plaza that was flanked by two buildings, one holding a legitimate theater and the other holding multiple cinema auditoriums. The ABC Entertainment Center contains low-profile buildings on a small percentage of the overall land of Century City, less than three percent.

The two principal buildings that flank the sunken plaza were designed as a visual gateway to the single office tower that was envisioned for the east half of the block. The concept of a single tower was later replaced by the triangular-plan twin towers realized in the early 1970s and designed by Minoru Yamasaki, arguably the most distinguished architect to contribute buildings to Century City. The Century City Hotel to the west of the Entertainment Center is also the work of Yamasaki, completed in 1966.

The ABC Entertainment Center can be evaluated within several contexts: as a live theater and arts complex in Los Angeles and in connection with the Shubert organization; as an example of late Modern architecture; and as a component of the Century City Master Plan. The Center is discussed briefly within each of these contexts below.

### **Historic Contexts:**

#### **Live theater in Los Angeles and the Shubert Organization**

The American Broadcasting Company (ABC) and the Shubert Theater were the original tenants of the Center. Both of these tenants are now gone, with ABC now concentrated in Burbank (from sites throughout Los Angeles, only one of which was the Century City office) and the Shubert Theater having ceased operations.

In the *Los Angeles Times* at the time of the ABC Entertainment Center's opening, critic Dan Sullivan asked, "How big is the audience for Broadway-style, Shubert-style theater in Los Angeles? Will the new house find a new public or just cut into the existing one?" (*Los Angeles Times*, 8/17/70, Cal., p. 1) Although it was publicly supported by the other live theaters in the city, the success of the Shubert Theater was limited by the available audiences and never did achieve the success of comparable establishments such as the Music Center in downtown Los Angeles. The Shubert Theater was mainly known for some of the large musical theater productions imported from New York that played there, including "Follies", "Annie", "A Chorus Line", "Cats", and "Ragtime".

The establishment of the Shubert Theater in the ABC Entertainment Center was based on the assumption that there were existing but untapped audiences for live theater on the West Side "who wouldn't come all the way downtown to the Music Center but might to Century City," as critic Dan Sullivan stated in the *Los Angeles Times* (8/17/70, Calendar, p. 24). The Music Center was a project of the County of Los Angeles and was built between 1964 and 1969, at roughly the same time as the planning of the ABC Entertainment Center. The Music Center contains a large concert and opera hall, a live theater, and a playhouse raised on a high plaza above Grand Avenue west of Temple Street. The Music Center was created as a part of the redevelopment of Bunker Hill directly to the east and the continuation of the Los Angeles Civic Center and County buildings directly to the south, sited at the crossing of these two major axes of development and adjacent to the freeway along the east.

The Shubert organization had been established in the live theater world for over 70 years by the time they came to Los Angeles. The person behind the expansion to Los Angeles was Lawrence Shubert Lawrence, who was the heir to his uncles Lee Shubert and Jacob J. Shubert, as well as to Sam Shubert who had been the father of the organization. These three men founded the company around 1900. By 1970 they were known mainly as the owners of much of the theater real estate on Broadway. As of 2001, they owned and operated 23 theaters nationwide, in New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. The *Los Angeles Times* in 1970 stated that the Shuberts "even after the federal anti-trust action in the 1950s . . . remain the dominant landlord on Broadway and the road. . . Once, the Shuberts were big producers as well as landlords. They presented more than 500 shows in their time . . ." implying that this era (the years of their most influential work) had ended long before 1970. The establishment of the theater in Los Angeles by the Shubert Organization in 1971 is not a local example of an important nationwide phenomenon as are some of those Shubert properties established in earlier decades. This era in the overall history of the Shubert Organization is too recent to properly evaluate within a historic context.

The ABC Entertainment Center is not strongly associated with the activity of the Shubert organization during a significant period of its history and is not prominent enough in theater in Los Angeles, or old enough to be considered historic. Therefore, it would not be considered eligible for listing in any National, State, or Local historic listing based on its associative value or for its “contribution to the broad patterns of our history,” as National Register Criterion A requires (National Register Bulletin 15, page 12).

### **Architecture of the ABC Entertainment Center**

Most of the architecture in Century City was produced during the initial decade of development from 1964 to 1975. Several more high rise buildings were completed in the 1980s. The architects who contributed major buildings to Century City were the most respected corporate commercial architects of the period, including Daniel Mann Johnson and Mendenhall (DMJM; Anthony Lumsden and Cesar Pelli); William Pereira Associates; Minoru Yamasaki; Albert C. Martin and Associates; Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill; and Welton Becket Associates. Two of the more distinguished, or at least unique, buildings in Century City are Minoru Yamasaki’s Century Plaza Hotel (one of the earliest buildings, 1966) and Century Plaza Towers (completed in 1975). The ABC Entertainment Center is situated between these buildings along the east side of Avenue of the Stars, the main spine of Century City.

The ABC Entertainment Center was designed by architect Henry George Greene and completed in 1971. Greene maintained offices in New York and Los Angeles, but none of his other Los Angeles projects have been recognized. He was not related to the noted early 20<sup>th</sup> century Pasadena architects Greene and Greene. The landscape architects’ work is better-documented; the landscape design for the complex was by Sasaki, Dawson, and DeMay who also redesigned Boston’s Copley Square in 1966-1969 (a design that was recently replaced). Much of the original landscaping around the perimeter of the complex, such as the plantings on the west terraces, is intact.

In their book *Los Angeles: An Architectural Guide* (Gibbs Smith, 1994), architectural historians David Gebhard and Robert Winter noted ten individual buildings at Century City, among which was the ABC Center. Their assessment of it, however, is consistent with their evaluation of the general architectural quality of Century City. Their entire assessment of ABC reads, “Big and dull -- mildly Brutal below, crisper above” (133). “Brutal” referred to “New Brutalism,” the style of later Modern architecture that was mainly practiced in Europe and usually in institutional settings, such as hospitals, universities, and state-sponsored housing. New Brutalism is characterized by block-like and sometimes monumental massing, deep shadows from large inset window openings, stark exterior materials such as raw concrete or brick, and a relationship between buildings and largely unplanted plazas and terraces. The 1950s and 1960s were its most significant period. The earliest buildings to establish the style, cited by Reyner Banham in his book on the subject, were Modernist icons such as Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles and Mies Van der Rohe's earlier buildings at the Illinois Institute of Technology

(IIT) campus in Chicago. The ABC Entertainment Center is a late example of the style, removed from the building types of its roots.

The original plans for the “Theme Plaza” (site of the ABC Entertainment Center) in Century City and the Music Center in downtown Los Angeles were both developed by Welton Becket Associates, among the few most significant firms working in the Corporate Modern and other late Modern styles in Los Angeles. Welton Becket Associates appears to have created the scheme for the “Theme Plaza”; however, the design itself was developed by others with only the rudiments of the Welton Becket concept -- two low, block-like buildings flanking a plaza -- retained in the later design stages. By contrast, the Music Center was fully developed by Welton Becket Associates.

There have been fairly obtrusive alterations made to the complex over the years in order to adapt it to current accessibility standards and provide improved circulation. The major exterior space, the sunken plaza, has been the most obvious site of exterior alterations. A broad, two-level ramp was added down the center of the plaza, and a prominent elevator tower was added to the east end of the plaza. The other major alteration is the addition of tennis courts to the flat roofs of both the Shubert and Cinema buildings. The fencing and lighting structures of the courts are now prominent features of the roofs, and are visible from much of the complex itself and from surrounding areas. On the interior of the complex, the lobby of the cinemas has also been altered, with new marble tile finish materials and large snack bars that imitate the Streamline Moderne style.

The ABC Entertainment Complex is not associated with a significant architect and is not an important or strongly characteristic example of its architectural style. Therefore, it would not be considered eligible for any National, State, or Local historic designation based on National Register Criterion C, which requires that a property must “embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction; represent the work of a master; (or) possess high artistic value” (National Register Bulletin 15, page 17).

### **ABC Entertainment Center as a component of the Century City Master Plan**

Century City was one of several planned communities that were developed on large, previously uninhabited or underdeveloped tracts of land in the Los Angeles area during the 1960s. During this period, movie studios were selling their back lots for development, including Universal and Fox. Century City, formerly the Fox Studios back lot, was conceived as an urbanized center for West Los Angeles, while other master planned areas in the region were focused on creating primarily residential environments, low in density and on much larger sites than Century City.

Most of the buildings from Century City’s first decade of development are intact. However, there has been a large amount of infill in the area of additional office towers that for the most part dwarf and/or outnumber the original buildings. The original plan is discernable and does represent 1960s master planning principles, with the location of large signature buildings interspersed among wide boulevards, fountains, multi-level plazas, and

underground concourses. However, the plan has served mainly as a framework for future development, as intended, and the area is no longer representative of the period 1966-1975, from the year the master plan was at its most developed and the first buildings were constructed to the end of the first phases of construction.

Although the Century City Master Plan was designed by significant architects and planners, many of the component buildings themselves have been modified over the years and the presence of so many new structures keeps the area from being a discernable historic district, where buildings and features from the period of significance would have to predominate. Therefore, the area would be unlikely to qualify under National Register criteria for its significance in planning history and would not be considered eligible for any National, State, or Local historic designation and the ABC Entertainment Center would not be considered a contributing building within any such district.

### **Criteria for Evaluation:**

#### **National Register of Historic Places**

Neither Century City as a planned development nor the ABC Entertainment Center itself currently meets the criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The evaluations above are framed in terms of National Register criteria as noted. In addition, the National Register sets a limit of fifty years of age for listing, and the ABC Entertainment Center and Century City are nearly two decades short of this requirement. Sites less than fifty years old are eligible for listing only if they meet Criteria Consideration G for properties that have achieved significance in the past fifty years, which states:

The National Register Criteria for Evaluation exclude properties that achieved significance within the past fifty years unless they are of exceptional importance. Fifty years is a general estimate of the time needed to develop historical perspective and to evaluate significance. This consideration guards against the listing of properties of passing contemporary interest and insures that the National Register is a list of truly *historic* places.

The ABC Entertainment Center does not possess exceptional significance. Some examples of potential exceptions to the fifty-year age limit given by the National Park Service's National Register Bulletin 22 include the following: the availability of a large amount of scholarly information pertaining to the property and its historic context; the fragile or short-lived nature of the resource, such as an example of a particularly threatened group of resources or one that has an inherently fragile nature and would be considered "old" before fifty years; or the property's association with a context that spans the fifty-year mark. None of these exceptions applies to the ABC Entertainment Center.

The Century City Master Plan is approximately thirty-five years old, and the ABC Entertainment Center is thirty-one years old, and they do not meet the criteria for

exceptional significance. There is no developed and published context in which to properly evaluate Century City at this point in time. Due to the continued construction of progressively larger buildings in Century City, the area has not retained the qualities and the percentages of buildings from the period of significance necessary for it to be considered a historic district.

### **State: California Register of Historical Resources**

The historic designation at the State level is the California Register of Historical Resources. The criteria for listing are similar to those for the National Register, and are applicable to the analyses above. The application of California Register criteria often allows for a lower level of integrity when the resource in question is demonstrated to be significant. The California Register has a limit of fifty years for listing, which the Center has not passed. The California Register has a “Special Consideration” for historical resources that have achieved significance in the past fifty years that is slightly different than the provision made under Criteria Consideration G for the National Register (see above):

In order to understand the historic importance of a resource, sufficient time must have passed to obtain a scholarly perspective on the events of individuals associated with the resource. A resource less than fifty (50) years old may be considered for listing in the California Register if it can be demonstrated that sufficient time has passed to understand its historical importance. (Title 14, Chapter 11.5, Section 4852: Types of Historical Resources and Criteria for Listing in the California Register of Historical Resources)

The ABC Entertainment Center is not fifty years old, does not meet the Special Consideration noted above, and is not significant in terms of the Criteria. Therefore it is not eligible for listing in the California Register.

### **Local: City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument**

The ABC Entertainment Center is not eligible for designation as a City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument for reasons similar to those noted for National Register and California Register listing. The development of Century City was an unusual event in Los Angeles planning history, and the area has its own unique characteristics because it was master planned and partially built during a specific period of time. However, the ABC Entertainment Center is not an example of the work of a noted or even known local architect, and it has not become a gathering point within the city of Los Angeles for any special kind of activity or cultural element.

The Shubert Theater is not unique as a musical theater venue in Los Angeles, and has not been as successful as other theaters such as the Ahmanson Theater at the Music Center, where musical theater has found a stronger audience during the same period of time.

The ABC Entertainment Center also did not hold significant or long-established activities or offices for ABC, and the association of the site with ABC was limited to office space and the naming of the complex.

As under the California Register and National Register criteria, the ABC Entertainment Center itself is not historically or architecturally significant within any established context and would not be eligible as a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument.

## **Conclusion**

The ABC Entertainment Center does not meet the criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, the California Register of Historical Resources, or the list of City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monuments. The property is an original part of the Century City Master Plan, but the center itself is different from the original intent of the master plan. The buildings and the complex lack architectural distinction, have not played a significant role in local history, and are not a part of an established historic context. The Theme Plaza was not developed as a true “cultural center” in the language of the 1966 iteration of the master plan, and is not a cultural center in the sense that the Music Center in downtown Los Angeles clearly is. It was rather one of two entertainment and dining venues that were developed in Century City, one at the Theme Plaza and the other within the shopping center in the northwest of Century City. Because it has no historic, architectural, or cultural significance, the ABC Entertainment Center is not a historic property.