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## Ambassador College from “That Thing You Do!”



All historic structures in the Los Angeles area with the word “ambassador” in their name seem to be doomed. [The famed Ambassador Hotel](#), which once stood at [3400 Wilshire Boulevard in Koreatown](#), was razed in 2005. And the former Ambassador College, at [131 South St. John Avenue in Pasadena](#), was largely demolished beginning in 2013. Coincidentally, both sites were featured in the 1996 film *That Thing You Do!* I never got to see the Ambassador Hotel in person while it was still intact, sadly, but I did visit Ambassador College on many occasions during the time I lived in Pasadena. Though a frequent filming locale, for whatever reason, I never blogged about the place. Until now, that is.

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Ambassador College was originally established by radio evangelist/Worldwide Church of God founder Herbert Armstrong in 1947. Upon moving his church's headquarters to Pasadena, Armstrong decided to create a four-year university on the premises that would teach the religious institution's ideals. He purchased several neighboring homes and mansions on Orange Grove Boulevard and began transforming them into a school.



Over the years, Armstrong acquired more nearby residences and plots of land, and his school, which he dubbed Ambassador College, eventually encompassed a large 4-block,



48-acre area consisting of outcroppings of mansions, gardens, and buildings.



In 1963, he employed the Daniel, Mann, Johnson and Mendenhall (DMJM) architecture firm to devise a cohesive design for the haphazard site.

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The group's creation was a mid-century modern masterpiece.





DMJM hired architect Peter J. Holdstock to design many new campus buildings, including three that became a focal point – the Ambassador Auditorium;



the Hall of Administration;





and the Student Center;



all of which surround a reflecting pool and fountain ...





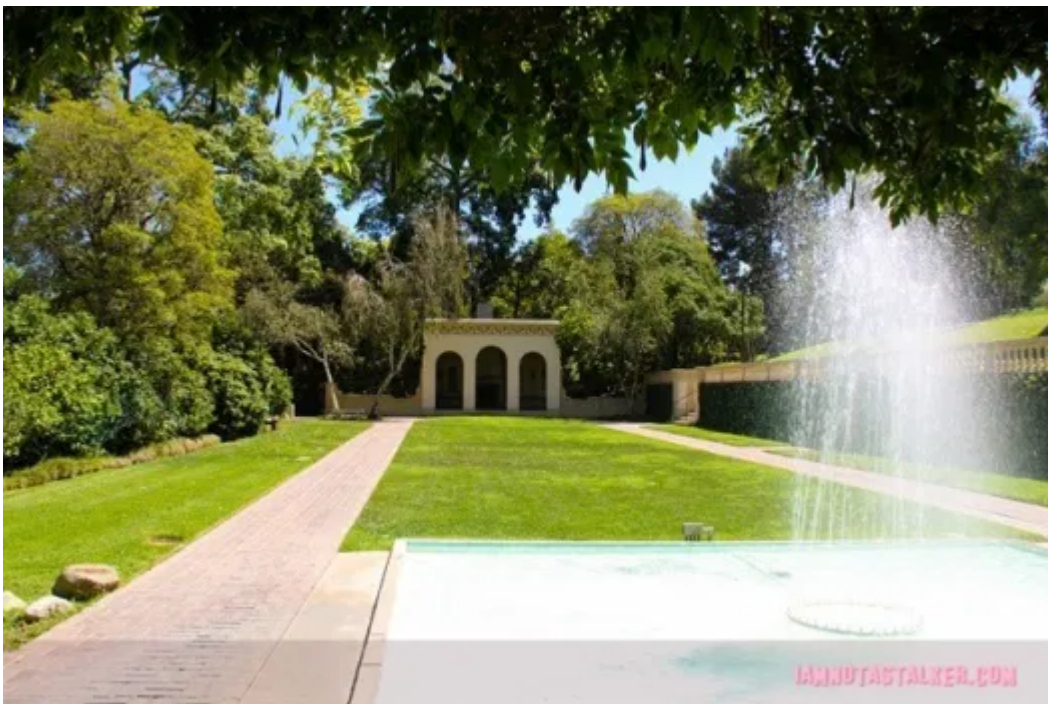
... that is capped off by a towering sculpture of egrets taking flight designed by David Wynne.

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Daniel, Mann, Johnson and Mendenhall also bought in landscape architect Garrett Eckbo to overhaul the campus' sprawling grounds.





The result was a dazzling array of colorful gardens, picturesque vistas, and sparkling fountains. You can see some fabulous photos of the school shortly after the redesign project was completed here.

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Sadly, virtually none of it remains. Armstrong passed away in 1986 and Ambassador College faltered in his absence. The school, a four-year, liberal arts institution, was not without its fair share of controversy, which didn't help matters. I won't get into the details, but tales from disgruntled alumni can be found all over the internet, most describing the Worldwide Church of God as a cult. The campus was shuttered in 1990 and students and teaching staff were transferred to a sister facility in Texas. The Pasadena site remained



vacant for almost a decade before being put up for sale in 1999. The property was finally sold off in 2004 to three different entities – Harvest Rock Church, Maranatha High School, and the Sares-Regis Group. The latter made plans to turn their 11-acre portion of the campus into a mixed-use development.



As part of the project, Sares-Regis tore down many of the school's historic structures. Today, Ambassador College is a shell of its former self.



My most recent visit to the school took place last month and I was shocked to see that the campus was virtually unrecognizable. Thankfully, the Ambassador Auditorium still stands.

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The fabulously honeycombed Hall of Administration is long gone, though.



Fortunately, I managed to snap a photo of its interior during a previous visit in August 2015.





Ambassador College was featured at the end of *That Thing You Do!*, in exterior shots of the supposed Santa Monica City of Broadcasting, where The Wonders filmed their *The Hollywood Television Showcase* segment.





The Ambassador Auditorium's dressing room ...





... and a campus bathroom were also utilized in *The Hollywood Television Showcase* scene.



*That Thing You Do!* is hardly the only production to have been lensed at Ambassador College, which should come as no surprise. The school's clean lines and striking architecture transfer beautifully to both the big and small screen.



The campus has been such a hotbed of filming activity over the years, in fact, that it would be impossible for me to chronicle its entire resume here. But a list of some of the highlights can be found below.

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In the Season 1 episode of *The Incredible Hulk* titled "Life and Death," which aired in 1978, Ambassador College masked as the hospital where Dr. Stan Rhodes (Andrew Robinson) worked, though not much of it was shown.



The school popped up once again on *The Incredible Hulk* later that same year, this time as a psychiatric institute at the University of Hawaii in Season 2's "Married."

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The campus' Hulett C. Merritt mansion is where Dr. David Banner (Bill Bixby) married Dr. Carolyn Fields (Mariette Hartley) in the episode.

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James 'Thunder' Early (Eddie Murphy) drops his pants during a live televised performance being shot in the Ambassador Auditorium in 2006's *Dreamgirls*.

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George (Colin Firth) taught at Ambassador College in the 2009 drama *A Single Man*. Of shooting at the school, an [Interiors article](#) states, “The filmmakers searched for a lecture hall that fit the time period; while most colleges had updated their lecture halls and buildings, this college in particular had been left untouched, for the most part. There was some modification and adjustments done in the interior spaces, such as painting and the removal of modern accoutrements, such as replacing whiteboards with blackboards, as a way of making the space more appropriate for the period.” Sadly, the Fine Arts Building, where filming took place, was one of the buildings lost to development, demolished in 2013.

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2009 was busy for Ambassador College. That year, the interior of the Hall of Administration portrayed an immigration office in the Season 1 episode of *Lie to Me* titled "Depraved Heart."







That same year, Nathan Ford (Timothy Hutton) attended a gala at the Ambassador Auditorium in the Season 1 episode of *Leverage* titled "The First David Job."





The Hall of Administration popped up – as a museum – in the *Leverage* episode that followed, as well, titled “The Second David Job.”







The Hulett C. Merritt mansion also served as temporary safe house for Nathan and his team in the episode. Both the exterior . . .





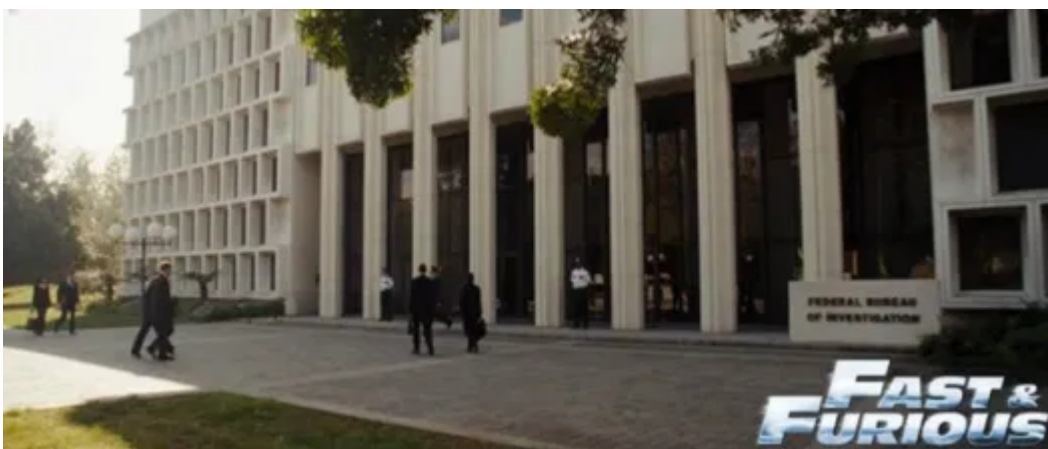
... and interior of the property were utilized in the shoot.







The Hall of Administration portrayed the FBI office where Brian O’Conner (Paul Walker) worked in *Fast & Furious*, also in 2009.



President Fitzgerald Grant (Tony Goldwyn) was shot outside of the Ambassador Auditorium in the Season 2 episode of *Scandal* titled “Happy Birthday, Mr. President,”

which aired in 2012.



That same year, the school appeared in one of my favorite commercials of all time, the Microsoft Surface “Movement” ad directed by Jon Chu. You [can watch it here](#).





The campus was featured extensively in the first season of the reality competition series *King of the Nerds*, which aired in 2013.



In 2014, Jennifer Jareau (A.J. Cook) was kidnapped from outside of the Ambassador Auditorium at the end of the Season 9 episode of *Criminal Minds* titled “The Road Home.”

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That same year, the interior of the Hall of Administration masked as the interior of Golden Fang Enterprises, Inc. Corporate Headquarters in *Inherent Vice*.



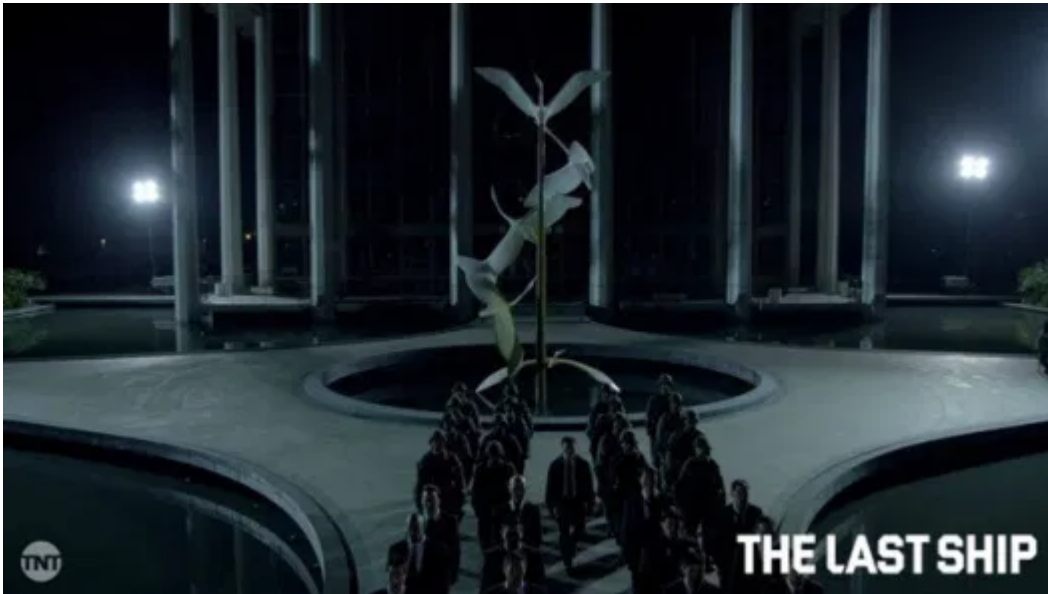
Melinda May (Ming-Na Wen) fights Andrew Garner (Blair Underwood) in the Hall of Administration's lobby in the Season 3 episode of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* titled "Chaos Theory," which aired in 2015.



And in 2016, Ambassador College masked as the Japanese National Archives in Tokyo in the Season 3 episode of *The Last Ship* titled “Legacy.”

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Until next time, Happy Stalking! 😊

**Stalk It:** The former Ambassador College site, from *That Thing You Do!*, is located at [131 South St. John Avenue in Pasadena](#).

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