

THE PRESIDIO MUSEUM CONTROVERSY - GUEST OPINION

BY GARY WIDMAN & DAVID P. BANCROFT

Some people object to putting Don and Doris Fisher's contemporary art museum anywhere in the Presidio, but the vast majority object to putting it on the Presidio's Main Parade Ground. Of the approximately 300 who commented to the Presidio Trust on the proposal, over 70 percent strongly objected - including the Presidio Historical Association, eminent landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, the Sierra Club, and many who had attended the Trust's public meetings. Few fault the Fishers' apparent generosity, but almost everyone faults their (and the Presidio Trust's) desire to ignore, rather than support, history and natural environment of the site. It appears that almost every historical, neighborhood and environmental group that has examined the proposal so far objects to the plan to put a huge building to display art at the Presidio's Main Post, a centerpiece and historically sensitive site.

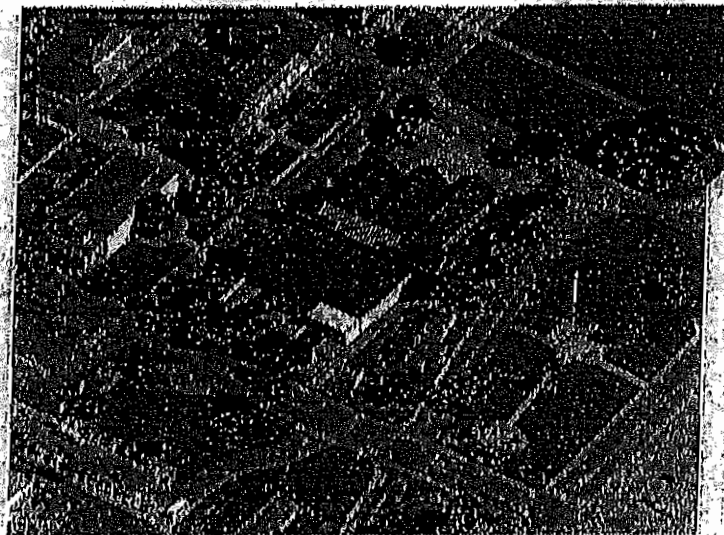
Many were hoping to hear Presidio Trust plans to reconstruct the old presidio, as has been done in Santa Barbara and Tucson - other cities with historic presidios. They were hoping to hear proposals for a first-rate history museum that would do justice to the Presidio's (and America's) history, to be located in the original Main Post. Instead, they heard that the Trust's proposal for an 80,000-square-foot hotel and the Fishers' 100,000-square-foot-plus contemporary art museum - huge buildings that could destroy the area's status as a National Historic Landmark District. It was particularly shocking because it appeared those buildings could be put in several less historically destructive locations on the Presidio, where they could attract just as many visitors, but would impose far fewer parking demands and much less traffic on neighborhood streets.

The Presidio Historical Association submitted a formal proposal for a history center at the Main Post, but the status of that proposal is now uncertain, and appears to have been rejected by the Trust.

The Presidio Trust Act, confirmed by the Trust's mission statement, makes the presentation of history a priority, as it is in all national parks with historic sites. When the park was created, the National Park Service convened a group of historians who suggested "stories" that might be told by a Presidio history museum. However, neither the Park Service nor the

Trust's responsibilities to the presentation of history. There was no response from the Trust.

More recently, Heyman wrote the Trust and Don Fisher (a former Trust board president), reminding them of the board's prior internal agreement to set up a history museum after the Lucas lease was complete and the Trust's leasing program was in place. Once again, silence from the Trust.



Presidio Historical Association's history center proposal - aerial view from over the Officers' Club
ILLUSTRATION BY TUAN NGUYEN

Trust did anything with those recommendations. In 2004, the National Academy of Public Administrators audited the Presidio, at the request of a Congressional committee. It told the Trust to do a better job with its public responsibilities, and if it could not, new legislation defining the Trust's responsibilities should be passed. The Trust did nothing.

One of the original Presidio Trust board members, I. Michael Heyman (also former U.C. chancellor and former secretary and CEO of the Smithsonian Institution), together with the *San Francisco Chronicle's* urban design editor, John King, scolded the Trust for ignoring

National Historic Landmark District - a loss of the park's most important historic status.

The Trust has offered no explanations for its persistent refusals to honor its responsibilities to present Presidio history, or for its unseemly haste to glorify the Fishers' proposal, in everything from its *New Yorker* ad requesting proposals for Main Post museums, to its most recent press release that continued to laud the proposed art museum.

Perhaps there is no reason for concern, but Don Fisher's claim in a recent edition of *Northside San Francisco* about how he

Recently, the Presidio Historical Association said that enough is enough, and nominated the Presidio for the 2008 Most Endangered Historic Sites in America, (a list compiled by the National Trust for Historic Preservation). It argued that the proposed hotel and Fisher museum could force delisting of the Main Post as a

came to select the site contradicts the Trust's Management Plan, and the memories of dozens of people who were a part of the process. In the article, Fisher stated, "I had been on the Presidio board and knew that there was an area that had been designated for a museum or a building of that sort at the head of the Parade Grounds. So, we decided to make an unsolicited offer to the Presidio. They then put the site out to bid to see if anyone else was interested in using the same space. It's done in a very democratic fashion." In fact, the only site "designated" for a large museum under the Presidio Trust Management Plan, in effect both then and now, is the former commissary site (now the Sports Basement) on Crissy Field.

The many people from the neighborhood, environmental and historical groups who attended Presidio Trust meetings on the Parade Ground also disagree with Fisher. They note that the Trust convened a series of meetings about "greening" the Parade Ground. At those meetings, the Trust staff said that an anonymous donor had provided funds for an eastern firm, the Olin Group, to prepare plans for the greening. But the staff refused to name the donor. At the first meeting, there appeared on the Trust's plans, at the south end of the Parade Ground, a building designated for a museum or other institutional site. Questions as to what institution was intended brought no answer. The Trust staff avoided answering questions about its impact on historical sites by saying, "It was only an idea." In every meeting, from the first to the last, participants expressed near-unanimous agreement that that building should be removed. Nevertheless, the building continued to reappear in presentations at subsequent meetings. At the last Trust meeting on the subject, the staff had prepared two plans, one with the building present, and the other with it gone.

It appears to the many who were there that

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there never was a time when anyone on the Trust staff or board could have said "an area had been designated for a museum or a building of that sort" at or anywhere near the Main Parade Ground.

Reading Fisher's *Northside* interview has now raised new questions in the minds of the community as to who paid for the Olin study, and why and when. They also note that when Fisher presented his proposal to the public, he acknowledged that it would include \$10 million to landscape the grounds directly in front of his proposed building.

Finally, Fisher's claim that the bidding was "done in a very democratic fashion" is completely belied by the record. The Trust's ad in the *New Yorker* requesting project proposals clearly suggested that the Fishers' museum was the proposal to bid against. The follow-up documents requested an architectural design that — coincidentally — was completely consistent with the Fishers' proposal. The request for proposals was therefore not handled in the usual way for federal contracting, and was hardly "democratic" in its implications.

It thus appears that the Trust has supported the Fishers' large museum and its own large hotel proposals over other proposals more consistent with the history and natural environment of this most valuable part of the Presidio. For that reason, local residents concerned with the Presidio as a park, and with the Trust as a credible institution, believe the Fishers' museum and the Trust's adjacent hotel must either be abandoned, or, at a minimum, relocated.

Gary Widman is president of the Presidio Historical Association. David P. Bancroft is a member of the board of directors of the Cow Hollow Association. (Views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Cow Hollow Association.)