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Renaming Avery Fisher Hall Raises the Question of Authenticity

By Amy Schiller

With [last week's announcement](#) that Lincoln Center's home for the New York Philharmonic will release the naming rights to what is now Avery Fisher Hall, the question of authenticity in philanthropic recognition took center stage.

The original benefactor of Philharmonic Hall, Avery Fisher, arguably represented the ideal marriage of deep pockets and deep feelings. As New Yorkers wrestle with questions of visibility and legitimacy in terms of who "owns" the city, the naming rights for this prominent performance hall are a crucible for the representation of the city's elite and the values they project.

Naming opportunities are the element of philanthropy that most fully melds ego and altruism, self and community. In my nearly 10 years of managing major campaigns, I have seen dozens of donors who initially brush aside the prospect of naming opportunities, only to reconsider as the emotional pull of linking one's name to a profound history, a passion, or enduring ideals revealed its potency over time. Often the initial hesitancy is due to the perception that putting a name on a building, a program, or institution is the ultimate in individual vanity.

Yet some of the most meaningful naming opportunities are subtle in their displays and replete with emotional significance for the donors and their loved ones. Under the best circumstances, the persona of the donor naming a space or a fund exemplifies what matters most about the charity beneficiary. Philanthropy's potential for a more poignant marriage of affect and capital is what elevates it from strictly commercial activity.

Such has been the case with Avery Fisher and Lincoln Center's Philharmonic Hall.

Avery Fisher was originally a violinist who later made his fortune in sound reproduction and electronics. His dedication to music infused all areas of his life, from the quality of his company's products to his service on boards of the Philharmonic and the Chamber Music Society at Lincoln Center.

Reportedly, his decision to name Philharmonic Hall in 1973, following a \$10.5-million donation (more than \$56-million in today's dollars) was characterized by the same initial modesty of so many naming opportunities: John Mazzola, then the general manager of Lincoln Center, had to persuade Mr. Fisher to permit Philharmonic Hall to be renamed after him. Mr. Fisher apparently protested that no one paid attention to the namesakes of major structures, quipping, "Who's Major Deegan?"

Amidst New York's precarious ecosystem of wealth, power, space, and culture, Avery Fisher Hall symbolizes philanthropy that connected one (exceptionally fortunate) person to an authentic passion and provides a space for a larger community to experience and appreciate those ideals.

In lieu of a formal aristocracy, the U.S. has the Tocquevillian tradition of voluntary associations, a civic republican strain in philanthropy that renders the practice as something beyond noblesse oblige and more like a stake in communal well-being, an enrichment of the soil on which you stand. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville described the particularly American phenomenon of "hearts enlarged ... and human minds developed ... through the reciprocal influence of men upon each other ... which associations alone can achieve."

Those qualities of reciprocity and good faith are what's at stake in the renaming of Philharmonic Hall.

Lincoln Center has clearly done a superlative job of managing the relationship with the Fisher family while safeguarding its future by running a \$500-million capital campaign. However, the result is that the controversial branding of New York's landmarks, which has led in recent years to ever more opportunistic real-estate speculation, may now ensnare yet another arts landmark.

Such a move is hardly unprecedented: The 2008 renaming of the New York Public Library for financier Stephen A. Schwarzman was controversial in part due to his reputation for, as *The New York Times* put it, "high-spending ways" representative of "Wall Street excess," including a 60th birthday party that reportedly cost \$3-million. The larger public personae of such donors can undermine the apparent authenticity of their naming recognition, their claims of ownership over evocative social spaces, and the ideals that they represent.

Try the newest parlor game: Track the ascendant riche of New York and create a betting pool for the potential new namesake for Avery Fisher Hall (particularly as, alas, I have no inside track on that closely guarded pipeline).

Imagine if the Qatari emirate chose to acquire a flagship landmark for its well-known cultural aspirations? It might be, dare I say, disconcerting, to have a foreign government claim the cachet of a local legacy.

Tech wealth has been averse to major gifts toward the arts, especially major capital structures. But what if an Apple executive or perhaps Facebook alum (and New Republic publisher) Chris Hughes stepped in: Would the communal experience of a concert hall become diffused into a thousand points of iPad backlight?

If stadiums are sometimes even bigger lightning rods in naming controversies—consider the anguish that renaming Shea Stadium as Citi Field caused, and apply that same sentiment to Lincoln Center—and consider the reduction of stature of the performing arts to a corporate billboard, patently designed to generate consumer goodwill.

(Speaking of sports legends, my dark-horse candidate to rename Lincoln Center would be Derek Jeter. If only he had the cash on hand!)

"So what?" you may ask. Any donor is as good as the next, if it allows important work to get done and the institution to thrive.

This is where it's important to check the authenticity meter. Just like Justice Potter Stewart said about obscenity, you know it when you see it—and when something does pass the smell test for authenticity, the public knows. Do donors seem to be attaching their names to the spirit of a place—or simply the address it occupies?

Though naming a building ostensibly reflects one person or family, it also represents us—who are we, the citizens of this city? Are we fellow music lovers who should have access to consummate performances? Or are we consumers, with only our brand loyalty and discretionary income to offer?

I may be overromanticizing an elite that never truly was. Perhaps naming rights have always been about ostentation, vanity, and disproportionate claims to social space. Few gifts are purely altruistic, and certainly the element of visible legacy complicates a theory of naming as public-spirited. Yet consider one recent narrative of a major naming gift couched in terms of loyalty, gratitude, and obligation to places that shaped the donor in question.

When Howard Lutnick, chairman of Cantor Fitzgerald, was asked this fall about his motive for an unprecedented \$25-million gift to Haverford College, he responded, "Love. ... Haverford was there for me and taught me what it meant to be a human being."

He was referring to Haverford's offer of a free education after his father died suddenly during Howard's first week of college, a sad event for anyone but more so because Howard had already lost his mother to cancer just a few years earlier. Today he has put the family name on numerous athletic facilities and an art gallery on campus to honor lost loved ones, including his brother, who was killed in the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center.

As with Avery Fisher, Howard Lutnick's naming gifts signify an authentic passion and humility—the highest expression of "what it means to be a human being." The stories behind some recent great naming donations show that authenticity is still possible. For New Yorkers, there is no more important quality. The renaming of the Lincoln Center performance hall is a test for the city, and the very practice of philanthropy itself.

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