

# San Francisco Chronicle

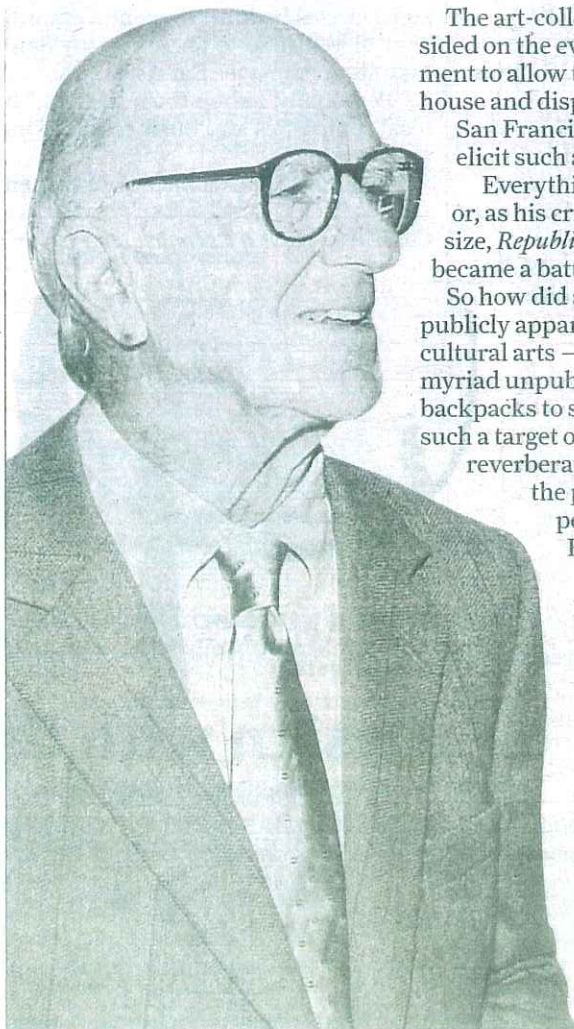
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JOHN DIAZ

## The gratitude gap

It's safe to assume that no San Franciscan ever endured more grief for doing more to improve the quality of life in the city than the late Donald Fisher.

It seemed that every grand gesture of philanthropy from the co-founder of the Gap was greeted with resistance ranging from suspicion to all-out hostility. When he wanted to bestow his 1,100-piece art collection to a new museum at the Presidio, he was chastised as arrogant and petulant. When he poured millions into a for-profit charter school to take over a neglected public school in the Tenderloin that was thoroughly failing the students it was supposed to serve, he was accused of scheming to undermine public education. When his family sought to replace the vast concrete slabs on San Francisco playgrounds with artificial turf — the newfangled variety that is all the rage on ball fields in affluent suburbs — opposition instantly emerged to question its environmental and health consequences.



Draw Altizer

The art-collection controversy finally subsided on the eve of his death, with an agreement to allow the Museum of Modern Art to house and display the Fisher collection. Only in San Francisco would an act of benevolence elicit such a high magnitude of malevolence.

Everything touched by Donald Fisher — or, as his critics on the far left like to emphasize, *Republican billionaire* Donald Fisher — became a battle.

So how did a man whose generosity was so publicly apparent in the elevation of the city's cultural arts — and so quietly instrumental in myriad unpublicized ways, such as providing backpacks to students in foster care — become such a target of vilification that continued to reverberate in city blogs after his death? In

the past week, I put that question to people who have worked with Fisher, both friends and foes.

Most agree that the turning point came about a decade ago when district elections tilted power toward neighborhood activists, resulting in a legion of supervisors openly hostile to downtown interests. Where Fisher saw a city that wasn't working because of an overly intrusive government — chasing away corporate headquarters, deterring startup businesses, putting in restrictions on parking and development that made life difficult for workers — the so-called progressives saw “downtown” (as embodied by

Fisher) as mortal enemy.

Fisher did not back away from the fight. At a time in life when most wealthy titans of industry would be retreating from public view and contentious causes, Fisher poured his money into committees and candidates that would be more receptive to concerns about the city's business climate.

“He could never, as a Lowell High school graduate, walk away from local politics ... because he thought things were going the wrong way,” said Mark Mosher, former executive director of the Fisher-driven Committee on Jobs.

Admirers and detractors agree: Fisher was not a warm-and-fuzzy combatant. He could be strong-willed, even irascible at times. “He was a bully,” said former Supervisor Aaron Peskin, who fiercely opposed Fisher's 2007 measure to allow more parking downtown. The alleged bully lost that battle.

Fisher was not one to court media attention. Over the years, some of my calls to him went unreturned. On the rare occasions when he would contact me for editorial support, it was usually about his ideas for improving education. During my tenure as editor of our opinion pages, neither he nor any of his representatives ever contacted us on an issue that directly affected his business interests, or sought credit for his philanthropy or sympathy for the abuse he was enduring from those who questioned his motives at every turn.

But he was human. He felt the frustration with the ingratitude and bureaucracy he encountered.

“There were points where he would say, ‘I'm never going to do anything in this city again,’” said his childhood friend investment banker Warren Hellman. “Two weeks later, he would call and say, ‘Look what I'm doing.’”

San Francisco is a better place because Donald Fisher never stopped caring about his hometown, and never cared too much about the cost of caring, personally and financially.



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