

Celebration of Wealth and Privilege: Elite Class Folly in Sonoma County, California

By [Peter Phillips](#)

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The September 29, 2012 opening of the Green Music Center (GMC) at Sonoma State University (SSU) was nothing less than a grand celebration of wealth and privilege. Beaded dresses, tuxedos, and political elites blended in a glorious aristocratic coming out. The ceremonious inauguration was a joining of the regional symphonic upper elites in delusional expectations of continuing high-class cultural immersions.

Built in a time of an economic recession and including \$47 million in public bonds, the \$150 million GMC represents one of the most opulent expensive building projects in the history of Sonoma County. The website for the GMC claims it is “Destined to become one of the most sought-after music and arts venues in the world.” “All three floors of Weill Hall are filled with handcrafted, European steamed beech maple seats, which remain acoustically neutral whether occupied or empty.” An A level seat for the first eight concerts costs \$626 and B level concerts are \$459 for the same. A single ticket for the first concert was \$81.00. Dinners at the GMC Prelude restaurant range for \$31-50, not including wine.

One attendee was reported to have remarked, “the bathrooms were nicer than my whole house.”

Splendid indeed are the ten majestic 118-year-old olive trees, which grace the Green Music Center’s Trione Courtyard leading to Weill Concert Hall, which are old growth Sevillano olive trees dug up and transported on a flat bed truck from Corning, California.

Weill Hall is named after a semi-billionaire, whose wealth accumulation is directly linked to the impoverishment of millions of American families and home foreclosures in the thousands in Sonoma County.

While SSU is suffering tuition increases, declining student-faculty ratios, and widespread institutional cuts, the corporate media fell over itself with acclaim for SSU President Ruben Armijana’s “vision”—vaunting magniloquently his personal drive. Presidents of state colleges, with the approval of the California State University (CSU) trustees, have total financial control over their institutions. Therefore, an administrative manager of a public taxpayer supported university can cozy up to the regional elites and pro-growth forces to build a Taj Mahal without any democratic process with the stakeholders inside the institution or the public at large. This unilateral control is as much about why 73.4% of the SSU faculty in May 2007 voted no confidence in President Armijana as was the issue of allocation of resources to instruction.

I recently asked my Sociology class of some 45 juniors and seniors if fifteen years ago the SSU development office had said to the students and faculty that they plan to raise \$150

million in support of new projects, what would you like to see done with the money—how many would have supported a world-class music hall? Zero hands went up and laughter filled the room. Sometimes we can only laugh at the folly of elites.

From a public perspective, \$150 million could have had huge regional impacts on poverty, homelessness, home foreclosures, and human misery. The self-aggrandizement of the symphonic elites, many of whom are multi-millionaires and one percenters, manifests a folly so classist as to challenge the very notion of human rights and equal opportunity.

The extravagance of the GMC means SSU faculty, students, and staff will continue to suffer lost resources long into the future due to continuing expenses in excess of income. All due to the willingness of regional elites and the CSU trustees to support and accept the megalomania vision of a single individual with far too much power.

In a century where humankind faces possible extinction, and 2.5 billion people live on less than \$2 a day with some 30,000 dying everyday from malnourishment and simply cured diseases, wealth concentration is sinful and the celebration of wealth with grandiose monuments is the mortal sin of the elite.

Someday, these monuments to wealth will be occupied, renamed and democratically modified to meet the needs of the people. In the meantime, we must continue to denounce classism and mobilize collectively for global human betterment.

Peter Phillips is a professor of Sociology at Sonoma State University and President of Media Freedom Foundation.

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