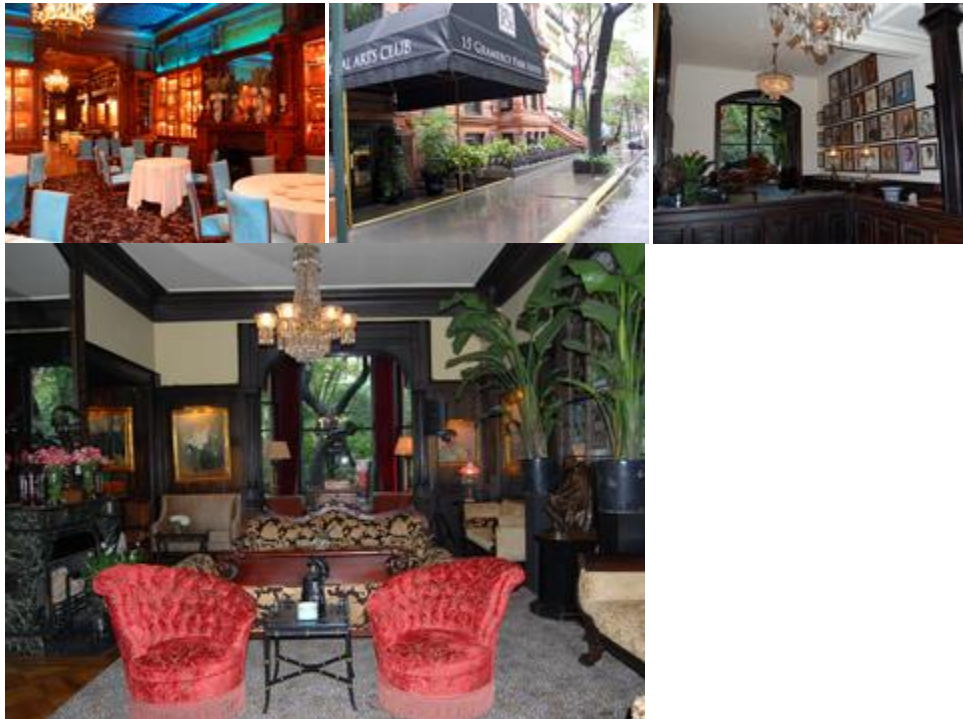


National Arts Club Kicks Off Season Amid Ongoing Controversies

By Mary Johnson, DNAinfo Reporter/Producer
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Sources said the National Arts Club was looking shiny and new again at an event on Wednesday night to launch its 113th season

GRAMERCY — The National Arts Club officially opened for its 113th season this week, putting its best foot forward to members despite continued controversies involving embattled former president O. Aldon James, including a lawsuit he filed against the NAC just last week.

“I committed to you that our club would re-open with many necessary changes having been made, and this evening I am very happy to tell you that in fact that is exactly what has happened,” NAC President Dianne Bernhard said, according to a copy of the speech sent to DNAinfo.

“As we stand here this evening, our club is already more legally secure, more fiscally sound and operating with an unprecedented level of openness, professionalism, integrity and transparency,” she added.

Club sources praised Wednesday night's kick-off event, as members marveled at how the historic building overlooking Gramercy Park was freshly cleaned and repaired after a summer spent sorting through the hoarded mess left by James, his twin brother, John, and their family friend, Steven Leitner.

"[The National Arts Club] wowed a lot of people last night," said one person who was at the event on Wednesday but preferred not to be named. "The place was so vibrant, so unbelievable, and everything was very successful."

Bernhard told DNAinfo Friday that several members greeted her with tears in their eyes, expressing their thanks over and over again for her work restoring the club.

"It was highly emotional," Bernhard added. "It's hard to say anything other than it was fabulous, it was breathtaking, it was a breath of fresh air."

O. Aldon James, who was booted from his position as president of the NAC in June, was also present, and spent the evening mingling among members of his entourage, according to a source. James remains a member of the club even as the lawsuit he filed last week prompted the NAC to halt an internal hearing process to determine his future status.

The fall 2011 season marks Bernhard's first as president of the organization. She took over in June and since then has been dealing with the remnants of James' tenure. The state attorney general's office and the Manhattan district attorney are investigating the club's finances, and the James brothers and Leitner filed a civil lawsuit against the club last week.

Multiple rooms throughout the club building had to undergo extensive cleaning and extermination after insects and dead rats were found in some of the spaces previously used by the three men, according to a recent letter Bernhard sent to the membership.

Bernhard also thanked the members of her staff who helped with the massive cleanup effort.

"I'm so proud of them," she said in her speech on Wednesday. "They have worked through the summer over very long days to help turn things around. They have inspired me more than they know."

Bernhard went on to pledge that members of the executive committee and the board of governors would "not cease in fulfilling their responsibilities as custodians of the club's assets and will do everything in our power to safeguard our property for our members," she said.

"As you walk around the club this evening," she continued, "I hope you will share my great sense of pride in our club and see the rich, exciting future that is just within reach for all of us."