

Questions Remain on Condition of Landmarked National Arts Club



Community Board 6's Landmarks Subcommittee discussed the condition of the National Arts Club.

By Heather Holland

O. Aldon James, the president of the National Arts Club, snubbed the Community Board Six's Landmarks subcommittee by declining to attend a meeting on Tuesday to discuss the condition of the club's landmarked building at 15 Gramercy Park.

To add to the political drama recently covered concerning the club and its president, the board has been receiving word from concerned community members who fear that the club's building is not being properly cared for.

"Certain of these issues that have been raised are not our business," said Gary Papush, the committee chair, at the meeting. "Our only concern is the condition of the building."

According to Papush, in 2004, community members nominated the building as one of America's 11 most endangered historic places, a list published every year by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The committee invited James to the meeting to discuss how the club has been working to rehabilitate the space, both inside and out. James was a no show, however, and with no explanation as to why he declined the invitation, he sent a short letter to the board instead, with little specifics and a general statement claiming the club was making its best effort.

James' track record, however, isn't reassuring. According to Papush, in 1998, the club applied for a grant from the New York State Landmarks Preservation Commission and received \$250,000 to alleviate some of the expenses of restoring the building. In 2002, the state checked back to see what had been done with the money. In response to their inquiry, the club sent all the money back.

As community members continued to complain about the state of the building, the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission sent out an inspector in 2004 to check things out. The Landmarks Commission only has jurisdiction with the exterior of the building. According to Papush, no violations were issued but they doled out a letter of warning to replace the canopy and exterior vestibule. The committee did not know whether the city had followed up on their inspections or not.

Papush suggested writing James a letter with more specific questions to keep him from dodging the issue. Some committee members said that it wasn't enough, but that it was a start. Papush also suggested asking James if committee members could go into the building and inspect it themselves. However, some members argued amateurs would have no way of knowing the condition of the building strictly based on appearance. They agreed that calling on state departments and experts would be the best way to settle the issue once and for all.

The National Arts Club did not respond to a call for comment by press time.