

# 475 Kent Avenue Evacuation

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On a freezing cold Sunday night, January 20th, about two hundred of us, all of us artists, some of us with children, were standing out on the sidewalk in front of the building in shock, wondering what was going on. Police cars cordoned off the block; fire trucks lined the block on both sides of the street. 475 Kent Avenue was filled with policemen and firemen. We were told to vacate within six hours and then the building would be "sealed"; we would not be able to return. Without any warning--given just six hours--we would be homeless and have no livelihood. When this proved impossible, we were given an extension--two more days to evacuate (one of these days was a holiday, Martin Luther King Day). Some tenants did vacate their apartments by that deadline. Most could not. We were given another extension--vacate by the following Sunday. Many residents, including myself, removed valuable items and left the rest in the premises. Then the building was closed. We could not enter without first going to the Brooklyn office of the Fire Dept., filling out and notarizing an affidavit and being approved for access for a limited amount of time, for specified reasons, such as removal of property for the purpose of vacating the premises.

475 Kent became something of a cause celebre. It was covered in the New York Times in several feature articles, and in other newspapers across the country; it was covered on major network television news. Episodes from the evacuation were posted on YOUTUBE. A website was created, [475kent.com](http://475kent.com).

When the Fire Dept. closed the building, they did so for a very urgent reason. There was a fire hazard in the basement of the building--stored grain--in a matzo factory. Firemen said we were living over a potential bomb. The grain could spontaneously combust. The stand pipes and the Siamese connections, which enable the firemen to draw water from the building to combat fire, were missing or broken. The entrance, an open stairwell, would become a corridor of fire. The back exit was blocked.

The building owner took the grain out of the building within three days and we thought we might go back into our units. Then the Fire Department came back with a second demand--to reactivate the existing sprinkler system, or install a new one. This work commenced right away; we couldn't know how long it would take. Tenants volunteered their time and expertise, assuming responsibility for the plans and some of the work demanded by this job. The Fire Dept. presented a list of many more items that had to be fixed.

Tenants unequivocally supported the Fire Dept. and fully appreciated that their action was vital and absolutely necessary. Having said that, we were shocked and baffled by the way the action was carried out. The stored grain and the defunct sprinkler system had been existing conditions. The Fire Dept. inspects the building every year and they had seen all of this. Why didn't they take action sooner? I was told by a fireman that they had warned the owner many times and decided, when he didn't respond to their warnings, just to evacuate the building. When they reached this decision, after waiting so long, why couldn't they have notified us, perhaps given us an evacuation schedule? Why couldn't the tenants re-enter their spaces after the danger was defused, and be on premises while the rest of the work was being done? (Many tenants, some of them renowned in their artistic fields, have installations--which they need in order to do their work--built right into the walls, ceilings and floors of their units.)

All of the demands made by the Fire Dept. were met, and we again live in the building. However, reoccupancy might require that the Dept. of Buildings issue a Certificate of Occupancy. This could take quite a bit more time. Perhaps we will be able to use our spaces only as commercial spaces, living elsewhere. Few of us can afford this, especially with New York City rents being what they are. Rental increases could make the rents too high for many of us. So, even though the building has been brought up to code and even if it receives a Certificate of Occupancy, we might not be able to afford to remain.

The 475 Kent Avenue situation will inevitably recur elsewhere. There are hundreds of buildings in this city like 475 Kent Avenue--buildings that are not zoned for living, where artists live and work, because the rents are under market and therefore affordable for artists. Many of them are vacated factories or warehouses,

structures that have not been maintained, perhaps for years, which harbor ongoing and sometimes unnoticed or unidentified hazards. When the City takes action, it responds by evacuations in an emergency, or by toughening zoning laws or tougher enforcement of existing zoning laws. All this has the effect of forcing artists to leave the City.

Instead of letting such situations reach this point, where lives are in imminent danger, or of inadvertently following a course which winds up being dismissive or punitive towards artists, the City could honor its own standards of housing safety by providing to artists safe, affordable and legal live/work spaces.

For awhile, the City sponsored the Artists in Residence (A.I.R.) program; this has been discontinued. Those artists who qualified in the past can remain in their spaces, but there is no more new certification. Other housing alternatives--Westbeth, Manhattan Plaza--no longer accept applications.

I wrote a Proposal for a building for musicians about a year ago to present, whenever possible, to interested people and initiate a collaborative process. Sculptor Deborah Masters expanded the core proposal to an outline for a multi-arts cultural center. Such a building complex would ensure that artists would remain here to do the innovative artistic work that has made New York City the creative crucible that has been recognized worldwide for many decades. Art is a major factor in the City's identity, as well as the City's cultural and economic health.

So, 475 Kent Avenue is far more than just one building, emptied of its artists, who could do their work there and form a thriving community because of this building and how it functioned for them. It is, ultimately, New York City itself and all New Yorkers who love their City. This is true for all cities, all villages and towns, everywhere there are artists. It is imperative that this problem be addressed. Artists are human beings who contribute to the culture of the community and Housing is a human right.

--Connie Crothers