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February 15, 2024

Hon. Eric Adams
Mayor, City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Hon. James S. Oddo
Commissioner, NYC Department of Buildings
280 Broadway
New York, NY 10007

Hon. Sarah Carroll
Chair, NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: Status of vulnerable buildings at 14-18 Gay Street and 16-20 Christopher Street

Dear Mayor Adams, Commissioner Oddo, and Chair Carroll,

I write to you to express my grave concerns about the current status of five vulnerable historic buildings located along Gay and Christopher Streets within the Greenwich Village Historic District. As you are aware, in November 2022, the Department of Buildings issued an order for the demolition of 14 Gay Street, a landmarked 200-year-old house, based on illegal work that resulted in the removal of a supporting wall, which compromised the integrity of the building. Nos. 14, 16, and 18 Gay Street, and 16, 18, and 20 Christopher Street, had all been purchased by Lionel Nazarian for \$12 million in April 2022. After the destruction of 14 Gay Street in November 2022 due to his carelessness or error, [we called for strict oversight](#) of all five adjoining properties to ensure they are kept safe and restored. Precious little progress has been made to protect these buildings in the intervening fifteen months.

Mr. Nazarian and his contractors/employees must be held responsible and punished to the fullest extent of the law for the very serious illegal action that led to the demolition of 14 Gay Street, and for the ongoing negligence at the neighboring buildings, which endangers lives, peoples' homes, and landmarked historic properties. We have been informed that the Landmarks Preservation Commission will not be issuing any violations or penalties for the damaging structural work done in noncompliance that led to the order from DOB to demolish the building, nor have any violations been issued for the egregious lack of maintenance of the other five structures. The Commission claims that the calamitous error at 14 Gay Street was the fault of the contractor, and not the owner, therefore they do not intend to penalize the owner – yet the contractor is also not being held accountable by either agency. Similarly, potential penalties by the Department of Buildings appear to be minimal and have not yet even been formulated, a year and a half after the illegal work occurred. This is unacceptable; these bad actors must be appropriately penalized and held accountable.

If current laws do not facilitate significant penalties for the illegal actions that have taken place here, then the current system is fatally flawed, and must be changed. However, we believe that taking appropriate action is fully within the City's power. The current inaction makes it incredibly tempting, or at least non-prohibitive, for an owner to demolish a historic building as they please, should they desire to, and face little or no penalty for doing so if they can claim a contractor was at fault. The contractor in those circumstances would similarly escape any serious penalty. And – as we've clearly seen – there is no impetus to act swiftly even when warnings or violations have been issued, as is the case at 16 Gay Street.

When the illegal work destabilized 14 Gay Street, the neighboring 16 Gay Street was also put at risk. It appears that the absolute minimum work required to ensure that the building is structurally sound has recently been completed, yet the building remains in a perilous state of disrepair. According to the proposed project schedule relayed to us verbally on February 12, 2024, by Assistant DOB Commissioner Yegal Shamash, building ownership does not intend to file for any restorative scope at 16 Gay Street until this summer, with work not anticipated to commence until early 2025. Stalling a full two years or more before conducting urgently needed repairs on this building, which is in a similarly fragile state to that of its neighbor at the time it received an emergency order to be taken down, is unacceptable. With each passing day, the precarious conditions and safety issues at the building surely worsen. Did we learn nothing from the fate of 14 Gay Street?

We were similarly told by Assistant Commissioner Shamash that the long overdue repair work at 18 Gay Street will not commence until November 2024 at the earliest, and is anticipated to take at least six months once underway. Why has it taken nearly two years to even schedule the urgently needed repairs at these buildings, let alone for the permits to be filed?

Meanwhile, around the corner at 18-20 Christopher Street, repair work has been in progress for many months, yet it was apparently just recently determined at a Landmarks Preservation Commission site visit that the original early 19th-century wood-clad dormers at both buildings need to be fully disassembled and reconstructed, rather than retained and repaired. Had the investigation of these important architectural features been conducted sooner and with the expediency their deteriorated state warranted, it is likely that they could have been saved. For months now, if not years, water has been slowly infiltrating and destabilizing the unprotected and un-weatherproofed dormers, causing ever-increasing degrees of damage. The negligence of the owner and excruciatingly slow timeline of repairs is causing irreparable damage to the delicate historic fabric of these buildings. Removing and replacing a critical 200-year-old feature of a landmarked building is no small act, and should only be undertaken if absolutely essential. We reiterate our request at the February 12th meeting that the Landmarks Preservation Commission share the documentation which would show that removing the dormers, rather than repairing them, is the only available option at this time.

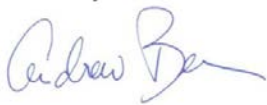
Overall, there has been little accountability and almost no enforcement action taken to ensure that 16-18 Gay Street and 16-20 Christopher Street, all under the same unreliable ownership, are restored, safeguarded, and protected, and that the sort of misstep and gross mishandling by all parties, including

the Department of Buildings and the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, which led to the unnecessary demolition of 14 Gay Street, never happens again.

The incredibly slow pace of repairs, lack of enforcement action or meaningful penalty by either agency, and seeming unwillingness by the Department of Buildings to be transparent about or enforce penalties, are all extremely troubling, and exacerbate the serious issues that have now been ongoing at these buildings for years. [In November 2022 we called for reforms](#) to prevent this from ever happening again. We demanded full accountability for the owner, contractor, and engineer for their roles and responsibility in creating these conditions, and the maximum penalties allowable under the law for those responsible. We also demanded that the City require swift repairs to the remaining structures, and impose strong penalties for failure to do so.

More than a year and a half later, not only has there been little or no progress on repairing these buildings, but there has been no meaningful reform to the system of oversight. [We again call for serious reform](#) to the system wherein an ever-increasing number of bad actors have been able to damage or destroy people's homes, and landmarked historic buildings, with little or no consequence for doing so, and with compliance or even assistance by city agencies.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Andrew Berman".

Andrew Berman
Executive Director

CC: Kazimir Vilenchik, P.E., DOB First Deputy Commissioner
Lisa Kersavage, LPC Executive Director
Steven Thomson, LPC Director of Community and Intergovernmental Affairs
City Councilmember Erik Bottcher
Assemblymember Deborah Glick
Community Board 2, Manhattan
New York Landmarks Conservancy
Municipal Art Society
Historic Districts Council
Landmark West!
Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts
Save Harlem Now!