

Facing Eviction, Carnegie Hall Tenants Lob Nepotism Charge

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The tenants of studios high above Carnegie Hall _ where Marlon Brando and Leonard Bernstein once lived _ were already angry about plans to evict them and gut part of the world famous concert building.

They hit the roof after learning that the son-in-law of Carnegie Hall's chairman and major benefactor, Sanford Weill, had been hired for a \$150 million renovation project there, with taxpayer money footing part of the bill.

But even with entertainers like actor John Turturro taking up their cause, time may be running out for the 33 remaining residential and commercial tenants.

A court recently ruled in favor of Carnegie Hall Corp., and the residents are appealing.

"They'll do whatever they want with the space, once the artists are gone _ it's kind of an artistic genocide," said Ashtiana Sundeer, a painter and longtime resident. "Why is it only on Weill's terms? He's using a corporate acquisition model which does not translate into an artistic, philanthropic environment. We artists become the collateral damage."

Weill, who until last year led the mammoth financial services company, Citigroup, says the contract to renovate the studio space above the hall for the hall's educational programs was given to son-in-law Natan Bibliowicz's firm because the Carnegie board considered it was the most qualified.

Bibliowicz had previously designed the \$56 million Manhattan home of the Alvin Ailey American

Dance Theater, where Weill's wife is chairman of the board.

"Sandy" and Joan Weill, who have donated tens of millions of dollars to both institutions, maintain that neither of them had any say in the selection of Lu & Bibliowicz Architects for either job.

Weill recused himself from deliberations about the architect, and did not cast a vote. The board considered one other firm whose name it would not divulge, and the selection was approved by the state agency that oversees a \$5 million government grant for the project.

"Personally, I'm happy about the architect they picked _ a very good one," Weill told The Associated Press in a Carnegie Hall interview last week.

Before the renovation can begin, Carnegie's management wants to evict the tenants still occupying the space, including seven longtime residents in their 80s and 90s. Carnegie Hall promises to find new housing for these rent-controlled tenants that is as good, or better, than what they now have.

"We will treat everybody fine," Weill said. "We feel terrible about it, but ... our demands for growth have increased."

He added, "We need the space that's part of this building to dramatically expand what we're doing in our education programs. We're not in the apartment business."

He says more than 100,000 children in New York and around the globe are benefiting from programs run by Carnegie's Weill Music Institute, which uses live satellite video feeds and the Internet to link some of the teachers and students, in addition to mostly in-person programs.

The tenants argue that the Scottish-born industrialist Andrew Carnegie, who opened the now landmark hall in 1891, later added the two towers and other rooftop studios with skylights

specifically for the use of artists and musicians.

For more than a century, studios in the two towers _ one 12 stories, the other 15 _ have teemed with dancers, musicians, actors, artists and filmmakers, spilling into the hallways during breaks; other studios were occupied by architects, voice teachers, a literary agent and a massive pipe organ.

By forcing out the tenants, they insist, Carnegie Hall is violating its founder's original intent.

Carnegie officials counter that there are no documents indicating the hall is legally obliged to rent the space to artists.

Carnegie Hall filed an eviction proceeding against the tenants in Civil Court, and a judge ruled in early December that the hall has the right to evict 18 commercial tenants; a decision on the residential occupants is pending. The tenants challenged the legality of the evictions in State Supreme Court, where another judge said they don't have the authority to force the hall to keep renting to them; the tenants are appealing that case too.

Some of America's most famous entertainers have lived, studied or taught in the 113-year-old artists' colony, including Lucille Ball, George Balanchine, Isadora Duncan and Marilyn Monroe. Perhaps fittingly, celebrities who honed their art there, like Turturro, "West Wing" TV series actor Richard Schiff and the singer Odetta, have spoken out on behalf of the tenants.

"It's a contradiction _ putting in education programs while putting out people who have kept the arts alive, and who are still teaching there," said Turturro, who took acting lessons for years in a tower studio. "It's a sad, sad thing."

Carnegie's project "is backed by some serious money," said Schiff, who studied directing at the Carnegie studios. "But you don't want new programs to make obsolete those people who have contributed so long to what makes New York great _ the genesis of new art. It makes no real sense. It comes down to doing the right thing."

Most of the estimated \$150 million renovation has yet to be raised by the corporation that manages the publicly owned hall, although the state has earmarked \$5 million for the project. The state agency approved the grant without knowing who the architect was, but later determined there was no conflict of interest.

An ethics expert questioned the arrangement, saying the corporation should have considered multiple bids and released the names of the firms vying for the contract.

"This doesn't pass the smell test," says Aaron Dorfman, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy in Washington. "It's a prestigious project to work on as an architect, and that has residual benefits for years to come."

With the battle escalating, Weill tried to reassure his critics.

"Nobody's trying to hurt anybody," he said. "We have a mission at Carnegie Hall. We've just got to think about how do we work together to make that happen."

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