

Why is this house under wraps?

It would be an uninquisitive tourist or a lackadaisical neighbor who hasn't wondered what's going on behind the scaffolding and protective netting that for many months have enveloped the great mansion and its annex at the southeast corner of Gramercy Park South and Irving Place. The short answer is: A lot.

Impressive as the house is as an architectural icon of the Gramercy Park Historic District, it has required extensive restoration and renovation to repair structural problems throughout the mansion. The new owner and his family have done little to the floor plan since the renovation by Benjamin Sonnenberg, a former owner. All of the current work had to satisfy the scrutiny of numerous city-government agencies, including the Landmarks Preservation Commission. To help guide him through the approval process, the new owner reached out to Arlene Harrison, president of the Gramercy Park Block Association, who referred him to GPBA's Historic Preservation Committee.

Like every building in our historic district, the house is a designated landmark — and has been since 1966. Exterior repairs and other outside alterations or new construction must pass muster with the Landmarks Preservation Commission. The owner and his highly regarded team of historic-architecture specialists have received approval and permits for the exterior restoration underway and for the addition of decorative fencing at the parapet and an elevator bulkhead on the roof that will be minimally visible from what the Commission calls "the



Photo: Steven Tucker

"The greatest private house remaining in private hands in New York."

public way." That means the new rooftop construction will not materially affect the view of the skyline or of the house itself from street level.

Since all of the properties in the historic district are landmarked only on the outside, owners are free to make internal changes (according to code) as they wish, provided they have no significant effect on the protected architectural features of the exterior.

The late architecture critic Brendan Gill called No. 19 Gramercy Park South (its official address) "the greatest private house remaining in private hands in New York." Its beginnings go back to 1845, with major changes to it in 1866 (when the mansard

roof was added) and 1909 (when an attached carriage house was demolished and replaced by the current annex on the Irving Place frontage).

Benjamin Sonnenberg, "the father of public relations," one of many noted owners of the property over more than 150 years, sold it in 1979. By then, he had internally combined the six-story annex structure with the original house to create one vast mansion of 35 rooms.

The question now on many minds is: When will the wrappings come off? The current target date is late March 2004.

Jack Taylor
Chair, GPBA's Historic
Preservation Committee