

Raised fist provokes ire at Woodside co-op board

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A plan to commemorate the Irish-American Athletic Club is meeting stiff resistance from people who live at the site of its former stadium in Queens.

Club members won 53 medals at Olympic Games held in the early 20th century, but when the I-AAC went into decline after the World War I, its headquarters Celtic Park gave way to a 750-unit apartment complex of the same name.

Now, some of the complex's co-op board members feel that the I-AAC's symbol is more evocative of the Black Power protest at the 1968 games than sepia-toned athletes of another era. One even likened the clenched fist — which, along with eagles, shamrocks and American flags, is part of the original logo — to a swastika.

Ian McGowan, who founded the Winged Fist Organization to commemorate the club, has countered that the clenched or raised fist is a mainstream symbol that is widely used in a variety of contexts, some of them commercial. A Celtic Park resident himself, he approached the co-op board in 2007 with the idea of a plaque honoring the achievements of the I-AAC.

"They had no objection in principle, as long as they didn't have to come up with the funding or the design," McGowan recalled.

When in 2008, he submitted a first-draft text and design, which included the winged fist symbol, the board objected to a reference to the Long Island City Star newspaper. (The apartment complex was once part of the greater Long Island City area and is now in the Woodside postal district.) He resubmitted an amended text and design earlier this year, but then board members raised their concerns about the I-AAC's symbol.



NYPD Assistant Commissioner George Anderson, who is commanding officer of the Police Academy, backs the campaign to commemorate the Irish-American Athletic Club.

McGowan furnished letters of support to the board from Congressman Joseph Crowley and Assistant Commissioner George Anderson, the commanding officer of the NYPD Police Academy and a Winged Fist advisory board member.

Both the Crowley and Anderson letters refer to the fact that the club's athletes came from a variety of backgrounds. McGowan's text for the plaque records that "members included the first Jewish and African-American gold medalists."

Because several of the gold medal-winning athletes were police officers, McGowan had gotten a commitment in principle from Police Commissioner Ray Kelly to unveil the plaque.

The board, which McGowan said is sitting out its third term having twice failed to get a quorum to hold elections, remains steadfast in its opposition.

At a recent meeting, some members had a printout of a Wikipedia entry on the "raised fist," which included a history of its use by radical movements and as an anti-fascist symbol.

McGowan said: "When I tried to point out that the Winged Fist

symbol predated all the groups on their list, one board member went into an impassioned tirade. She mentioned that she was a child of the 60s, and had the fist symbol forced in her face, and that it is still used today by the Aryan Nation. She said that the swastika also had another meaning, before the Nazis ruined it for everyone."

McGowan argued that the clenched fist has no generalized meaning other than perhaps as a symbol of strength and unity. The Wikipedia entry would seem to prove that. Of the illustrations accompanying it, one is apolitical: it promotes Northern Soul, a movement of enthusiasts of American music in the north of England. A second is a photo of an elderly woman at an anti-war demonstration; a third is of a picture of the Tommie Smith and John Carlos protest at the Mexico Games 41 years ago; and a fourth is of the rose and fist symbol of the moderately left-wing Socialist International, the world's largest political organization. The governing parties of Britain, Spain and Australia, all allies of the U.S., are among the SI's members.

The Winged Fist Organization's founder has since discovered that the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, which had a role in building Celtic Park, has a clenched fist in its logo. "Some of the uses of the fist are very mainstream," he said, adding that fists, eagles and flags are all part of the U.S. presidential crest.

A call to Celtic Park's sponsor, who owns a majority of the co-op's shares, was not returned by press time. The Celtic Park office manager said that a letter from the co-op's lawyer was due to sent to McGowan this week.

"I strongly hope that they will reconsider," McGowan said, "and that we can have some kind of dialogue."



Ian McGowan's proposed plaque for Celtic Park.