

Reawaken the Turtle



1981 - original exterior



2019 - preparing to bring back original exterior paint

Grant Landmark Status

Protect our spiritual and cultural community asset



Niagara Falls High School Native American Youth Club

2023—2024

*Received 2/7/2024
Elizabeth Eaton*

Feb. 19, 2024

Mr. James Perry, Chair

Mr. Brian Archie

Mrs. Traci Bax

Mr. Donta Myles

Mr. David Zajac

CC: Mayor Robert Restaino

Dear Members of the Niagara Falls City Council:

We are members of the Native American Youth Club at Niagara Falls High School. With our teacher advisor, Ms. Jessica Forgette, many of us attended and spoke at the Jan. 18 public hearing of the Niagara Falls Historic Preservation Commission in support of designating the Turtle as a historic landmark.

We are urging you to vote in favor of accepting the commission's application for landmark status of the Native American Center for the Living Arts (aka the Turtle) and ask that you hold a public meeting of the Council so that the community can directly present to you their views and efforts on behalf of reawakening the Turtle. We hope that you will see it as only fair that you hear our voices before you vote on such an important community matter.

We have joined with the Reawakening the Turtle Committee to help support a group of Native and Non-Native people present the following materials to you for review prior to your vote on whether to grant landmark status.

- Our Native American Youth Club letter of support for the Turtle
- Tim Johnson's response to Roger Trevino's (NFR) op-ed and Mr. Johnson's letter to the Niagara Falls Historic Preservation Commission
- A letter of support from Cheryl Hargrove, President of Hargrove International and the first Director of Heritage Tourism for the National Trust for Historic Preservation
- Plan and template to move forward
- 2021 Niagara Global Tourism Institute Report excerpts
- Siera Chaney (Rogers) 2019 Thesis 'The Turtle: Revitalization and a Means of Renewal' excerpts - One potential reuse idea (Refer to emailed/digital version or scan QR code below)



- Appendix: Newspaper articles and information about the opening of the Turtle and past efforts to save historic buildings that we believe can provide insights and context to help ensure mistakes of the past aren't repeated

On Saturday, Feb. 24, there will be a Native community meeting on preserving and saving the Turtle hosted by Native American Community Services of Erie and Niagara Counties, Inc. The group has had a positive response to its invitation for people to come and share their memories, ideas and hopes for reawakening the Turtle.

We look forward to attending the City Council meeting on Feb. 21.

Thank you for considering our request.

Sincerely,

Niagara Falls High School Native American Youth Club

Reawaken the Turtle Planning Committee

City Council Member,

We, as the members of the Native American Youth Club at Niagara Falls High School, feel the need to speak on behalf of the youth of this city and their interest in saving The Turtle. Not only are we as teens, ignored in society about what's best for us; as Native youth and allies we are equally ignored and demand to be heard on this topic.

We strongly believe that the landmarking of the Turtle will be a huge benefit to the city, the youth, and surrounding Indigenous communities. Allowing this building a chance to be reawakened would allow a place for so many Native youth in the city and their allies to go to learn about and embrace their culture. This is a moment in time that we are able to voice the need to add something positive to this city instead of the violence, poverty, and negative views so many people focus on when it comes to the City of Niagara Falls.

At our age, we did not have the opportunity to enjoy and experience all that the Turtle had to offer to the community when it was open. We hear stories from our relatives about how they had felt seen and appreciated in a society that sees Natives as a vanishing peoples or had no understanding of the beautiful, rich culture of our ancestors. Many do not realize the impact that colonization continues to have on us as youth in America. Seeing the Turtle deteriorate and being invisible is like watching our own history repeat in front of our faces.

We ask the City Council to really think about their decision on approving the landmark status for the Turtle, not just for the city, but for the young people who want to make Niagara Falls their forever home. Give us something to bring our own children to and for our children's children to enjoy. Give us something to be proud of as Native people. Give us something to connect back to our ancestors and be able to share with the world. Give us, and this city, something to look at and say, "We protected that. We saved that."

Thank you,

Emma Santos

Samantha Rembliton

Amelia Jacob

Jackson Barr

Connor Ground

Michaela Doreen

Allison Moore

Soren Skye

Kobe Rickard

Madelyn Jacob

Response to Niagara Gazette “Guest View” written by Roger Trevino (NFR), Feb 9, 2024

Tim Johnson is former assistant director for Community Services, associate director for Museum Programs, and acting director at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian. Mr. Johnson was a staff member of the Native American Center for the Living Arts (The Turtle), serving as media manager and editor of publications. Acclaimed exhibits and programs were produced during his tenure at the National Museum of the American Indian including *Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian*, *The Great Inka Road: Engineering an Empire*, *Glittering World: Navajo Jewelry of the Yazzie Family*, *Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women’s Dresses*, *For a Love of His People: The Photography of Horace Poolaw*, *Before and after the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes*, *A Song for the Horse Nation*, and *Up Where We Belong: Native Musicians in Popular Culture* among many others. He was born in Niagara Falls, NY; his Indigenous community is Six Nations of the Grand River.

Mr. Johnson - Unfortunately, the NFR column in the *Niagara Gazette* regarding the Niagara Falls Historic Preservation Commission’s recommendation to designate the Turtle building as a historic landmark leaves out some important facts. As a former Turtle and Smithsonian employee, I’ve provided my responses to Roger Trevino’s (NFR) Guest View below.

Guest View - *First, while the Turtle building is approximately 42 years old, it was only in operation as the Native American Center for the Living Arts for less than a dozen of those years. It failed because there was no ability to make the facility financially viable. It then sat off the tax rolls for a number of years, until the City of Niagara Falls facilitated its sale and asked NFR to buy it.*

Response - The Turtle failed not because financial viability was not feasible, but due to the structure of the Native American Center for the Living Arts as an organization with its board and decision-making leadership lacking the capacity to implement necessary actions on many levels. Several Indigenous professionals sought to correct that structure by addressing the board of directors throughout that time but were rebuffed.

Guest View - *Your article doesn’t mention that, at 67,000 square feet, the Turtle building is just too big to support the kind of cultural center some preservationists desire. Other reporting has indicated that a building that size should be designed to accommodate 6,700 people, yet the Turtle can seat less than 1/10 of that.*

Response - I’m not sure what this is about, but anyone with programming experience in museums and Indigenous cultural centers would have numerous uses for the spaces at the Turtle. In fact, when I and my colleagues were programming its spaces, the Center was a leader in showcasing innovative Indigenous programs. These ranged from powwows and art shows to arts and crafts markets, to film screenings, conferences, Indigenous blues and rock concerts, diverse cultural programs, and even Indigenous theater productions. These are the

facts. Attendance ranged from small groups attending lectures and workshops to hundreds attending the powwow.

Guest View - *The article also didn't mention that NFR bought the property for \$1 million: \$100,000 per year for ten years. Thanks to NFR efforts, the property was, and remains, back on city tax rolls. Since purchasing the property, NFR has paid more than \$1.3 million in taxes to the city, county and school district – in addition to the original purchase price.*

The article only cites two public announcements, but NFR has made numerous efforts over the years to develop the site. Indeed, NFR spent considerable expense and several years attempting to establish a Smithsonian-affiliated museum at the site. These efforts included hiring a museum consultant and other professionals and touring the site with representatives of the US Department of the Interior. In the end, NFR couldn't find any financially viable Native American group with an interest in moving this project forward. Other efforts included outreach to indigenous communities as far away as Mongolia.

Response - I was part of a group that toured the Turtle when I was with the Smithsonian, and although making the Turtle part of the Smithsonian was and is not doable, associate status could be proposed that could potentially bring exceptional Indigenous objects to Niagara Falls, far exceeding the modest collection originally held by the Turtle. The NMAI has made several long-term loans to other Indigenous museums across North America, including sending substantial collection materials to the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City, and to museums such as the Mi'kmaw Debert Cultural Centre far to the east in Nova Scotia, and to the Anchorage Museum far to the west in Alaska.

As mentioned to the Historic Preservation Commission, which properly identified the Turtle as a historic site, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian was influenced by the work conducted at the Turtle and by the professionals whose careers were launched at the Turtle who brought that experience to the Smithsonian. So as one cites the desire to have Smithsonian engagement, it's important not to overlook this historical fact of its development and of the understanding of the status of the Indigenous museum field during that time.

Guest View - *More recently, NFR attempted to attract a hotel development to the site, but since the property had been downzoned in the years since NFR took over the building, the City wouldn't grant a variance back to the original height limit in order to get the project done.*

Never in any of these discussions was the issue of historic significance of the Turtle structure raised.

Response - For anyone who knows the history of the Turtle, discussion of its historical significance has been inherently and consistently understood.

Guest View - *We have always been open to working with the indigenous community in Niagara Falls on cultural preservation efforts and remain so. Yet no financially viable group has ever*

stepped forward with a serious proposal for the successful operation of the Turtle facility in any way. Moreover, we note that museums across the country are moving away from the display of native artifacts and returning these artifacts to the tribal lands in response to new federal regulations. Most recently, in fact, the American Museum of Natural History in New York closed its Native American exhibits for this reason.

Response – This statement reveals profound ignorance of the inner workings of the Turtle by professional staff during its development and implementation. The exhibitions and programs at the Turtle were completely conceptualized and developed by Indigenous people and incorporated direct Indigenous community engagement and involvement at every level. Institutions such as the American Museum of Natural History have closed their Native American exhibits because new federal regulations require museums to obtain consent from Indigenous leaders prior to displaying or researching cultural heritage items. This significantly confirms, rather than denies, the historical significance of the Turtle. And again, Rick Hill and I brought many of these leading practices from the Turtle to the Smithsonian. In 1998, I was hired by the National Museum of the American Indian principally to create its Community Services Department, which established approaches that the new federal guidelines now reinforce. This clearly shows the historic character of the Turtle and how far out in front it was in shaping Indigenous museology, in influencing mainstream museum practice, and planting the seeds that now further shape federal guidelines.

Guest View - *In the end, we do not believe that out of town, non-native preservationists should be dictating what structures in Niagara Falls warrant historic designation—nor what structures are historically significant to Native Americans who live in Niagara Falls.*

Response – This is disinformation designed to denigrate those now involved in the formal recognition of the Turtle as a historic site. I was born in Niagara Falls, New York, am a citizen of Six Nations of the Grand River, and nearly everyone I worked with at the Turtle were from Haudenosaunee communities within the region. But moreover, a main function of our purpose was to educate the general public and form alliances with non-Indigenous people. We are grateful and proud of the support our allies are providing.

Guest View - *If a building so wrong in so many ways is landmarked for such wrong reasons, it is the taxpayers of Niagara Falls who will ultimately suffer.*

Response - Actually, the building was right in many ways and for many good reasons. Architecture is designed to address the programmatic visions and needs of its occupants. In this regard the Turtle had a profound impact upon history. Today, Indigenous museum, arts, cultural, and organizational professionals are present, prolific, and active, continuing to advance new developments in the field. One can argue about the proper course of action for the return of an Indigenous led organization that can properly address the Turtle's needs and whether the current ownership of the building is — or ever has been — the right ownership, but on the fundamental question of whether the Turtle deserves Historic Landmark Designation there exists but one honest and honorable answer. Yes.

January 12, 2024

Niagara Falls Office of Planning & Environmental
Niagara Falls Historic Preservation Commission
745 Main Street
Niagara Falls, NY 14301

P.O. Box 187
1979 Fourth Line Road
Ohsweken, ON NOA 1M0

To Whom It May Concern,

I write to strongly recommend that the Niagara Falls Historic Preservation Commission designate the Native American Center for the Living Arts, the Turtle, as a historic landmark. Within the realms of Indigenous art, architecture, culture, and heritage, the Turtle had a profound impact not only upon people in the local Niagara region (on both sides of the international border) but, due to those who worked there during its crowning years and carried on professionally, quite significantly upon the Indigenous museum field.

My involvement with the Turtle began as a volunteer in 1980, then transitioned into full time employment beginning at its opening in 1981, and extended for the next seven years. I was there during the epic era when the center was establishing and advancing best practices for Indigenous museology resulting in spectacular contemporary art exhibitions, Indigenous theater performances, programs that ranged from traditional arts to contemporary music, publishing of catalogues and magazines, forging repatriation policies, and much more.

It is difficult to fully express what a remarkable impression those experiences had on me. To be embraced within the beautiful form of a building designed by Arapaho Architect Dennis Sun Rhodes while surrounded by exquisite art on its interior walls while engaged in creative pursuits with colleagues, was absolutely incredible. To anyone who truly understands how this place inspired lives and facilitated social change, the building's designation as a historic landmark would be obvious.

Energized by my experiences at the Turtle, I dedicated my career to educating the public about the Indigenous experience, utilizing a variety of forms, genres, and tools toward the communication of accurate Indigenous histories as well as perspectives on current issues and events. During the eleven and one-half years I spent in senior management at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, much of what I first learned at the Turtle came into play. As associate director for Museum Programs I oversaw exhibitions, public programs, education, publishing, visitor services, and film production. Along with former Turtle colleague Rick Hill, who preceded me in senior management at the Smithsonian, we did a great deal to shape the direction of the nation's leading Indigenous arts and culture institution.

In this regard, there is a direct line from the Turtle to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, which opened in 2004 on the National Mall. In fact, one would be astonished

by the similarity of the designs of the atriums of both buildings. Programmatically, we followed the same intentions established at the Turtle. That's history.

I strongly encourage the Commission to take a collective moment to seriously reflect upon what the Turtle represents not only for the City of Niagara Falls, but also for the Indigenous communities in the region. The administrative capacities required to sustain the Turtle during its early life were limited, hence its failure. But that is clearly no longer the case. The breadth and depth of proven management experience in the museum and arts and culture realms are today, significant.

I sincerely hope you all do the right thing and stand on the ground of truth telling regarding the historical impact and legacy of the Turtle. Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tim Johnson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "J".

Tim Johnson
519-774-2014

January 28, 2024

Michael Pesarchick
Planner II, Historic Preservation Specialist
City of Niagara Falls
745 Main Street
Niagara Falls, NY 14301

Dear Mr. Pesarchick:

This letter supports the designation of Landmark status for the 45-year-old “Turtle” building. While this asset does not meet the traditional 50-year requirement for listing a historic site, the significance of this building cannot be understated. The unique design by Northern Arapaho architect Dennis Sun Rhodes makes the Turtle a signature icon worthy of designation now.

As the first Director of Heritage Tourism for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, I understand the importance of historic sites to authentic visitor experiences and place-based economic development strategies. Heritage travelers are defined as typically high-value visitors who stay longer and spend more in a destination, seeking out places with interesting stories and sites. National research indicates that 65% of leisure travelers want to uncover the heritage of a place, while 67% say it is important to immerse themselves in the culture of a destination. Distinctive architecture is one way Niagara Falls can set itself apart from other destinations and attract this important segment of the traveling public.

I encourage the Commission to make an exception to the current guidelines and award landmark status to the Turtle. The designation will recognize this iconic structure as one of the city’s valued assets for current and future generations.

Sincerely,



Cheryl M. Hargrove
President

Cc: Ally Sprongr DeGon

While the tourism industry in Niagara Falls does currently support the city and its population in many ways, there is no doubt it could be doing much more. Interviews with leaders and business owners in Niagara Falls have highlighted a number of core weaknesses, the most prominent of which center around a lack of tourism-related **attractions** and **activities**, both year-round and in particular during the winter low season.

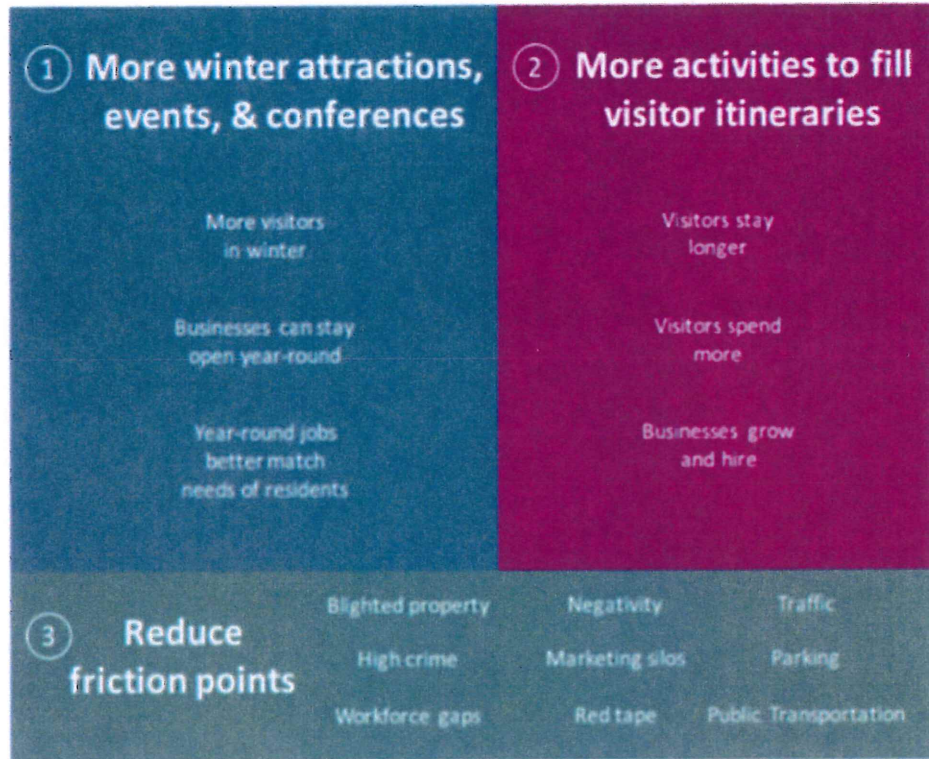
Hotel occupancy rates		
	Niagara County	Niagara Falls, ON
Lowest monthly average (Jan)	31.9%	42.7%
Highest monthly average (Aug)	88.2%	95%
Yearly average	61.2%	68.4%
Number of rooms	4,543	13,766

STR Global, 2009-2019 occupancy rates for Niagara

Weaknesses in Niagara Falls' tourism economy can be understood in terms of three areas:



Growing Tourism in Niagara Falls to Boost the Local Economy



Plan and template to move forward

Central to a reopened Turtle is developing a financial plan and model to predict the positive impact of a “reawakened” Turtle on the City and Region. A foundational tenet of this effort is not to have the city own, fund, manage, or operate the building in any way. The Turtle would contribute to city life as a year-round destination venue for residents, school children, and visitors. It would also be an employment center and a positive addition to the concept of a Cultural District aligned with cultural institutions within the city and region.

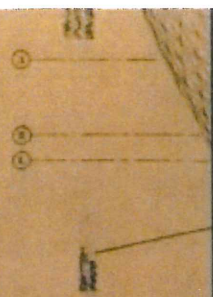
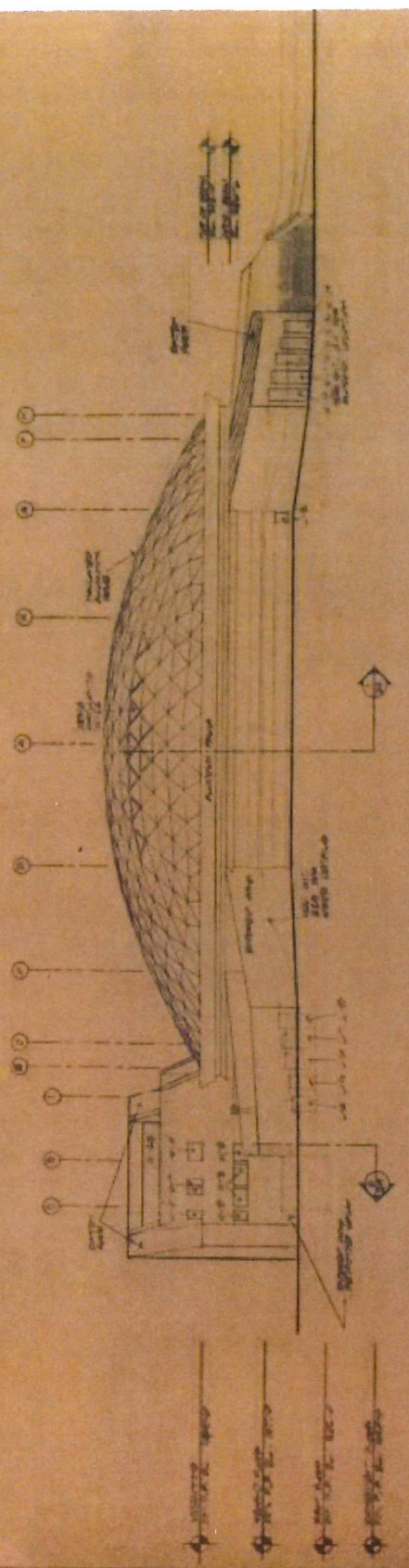
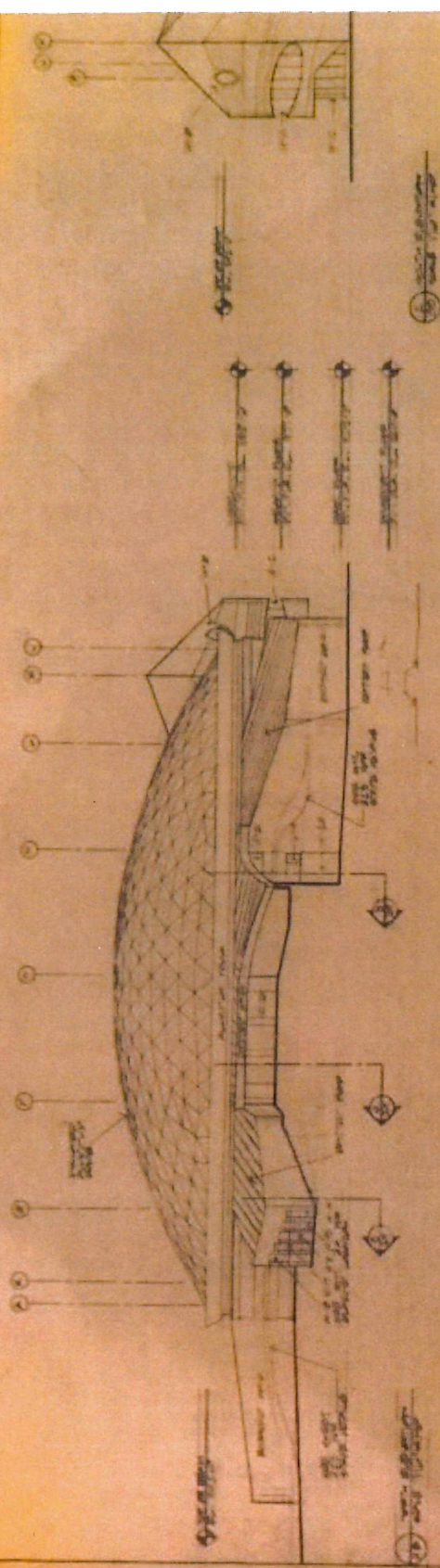
Past examples provide evidence of the interest that tourists, especially international ones, have in Native American history and culture. In the 1990’s Native American traditional dances were performed 5 times per day at the One Niagara Welcome Center. One hundred attendees purchased tickets in advance for each of the 5 performances.

A reawakened Turtle is envisioned to be a stepping stone to connect visitors to other cultural opportunities within the city (NYS Parks Visitor Center -> Turtle -> Aquarium/Underground Railroad Heritage Center/Ft. Niagara/etc.) All are part of a cultural “ecosystem” that can help facilitate an additional stay, more dinners, and drinks, leading to more positive economic benefits for local businesses, vendors, and cultural institutions, as it tells our unique story – one that only we can tell.

To that end, this effort has a local model to move forward – Buffalo’s Central Terminal. Vacant for decades and seen as a community eye-sore, it is now finding funding and new life based on community outreach, planning, and recognizing its cultural and historical value to the community. What one city can do; another can do. Our building is in much better shape and has a smaller footprint to update and operate.

In 2016, Inquiries to NFR and a Native tour of the Turtle were conducted. A financial model was created at that time that will be updated to be made current. Plans are being developed, which require time and space to research and analyze options. If the owners of the Turtle would perform basic maintenance of the building in the meantime – cleaning roof gutters of debris, for example. It wouldn't cost much or be a time-consuming and it would build goodwill with the community.

The planning committee is currently in the process of obtaining 65 architectural drawings of the Turtle from the University of Minnesota. Unfortunately, the City’s Engineering Department, Code Department, nor the construction company that built the Turtle, Scrufari Construction, had these drawings. The Engineering Department gave its set “to a developer,” and they never returned it to the vault. This may explain the challenge code enforcement faces when trying to plan for an inspection of the vacant and neglected building in order to determine if any code violations are occurring.



'Almost too many' crowd Turtle opening

**Related story, photos, 3A May 18, 1981*
Thousands of people came to the party Sunday.

The lines in and out and all through the Native American Center for the Living Arts never stopped, from the time the building opened to the public for the first time until hours later when it closed.

People crowded the first level and jammed together to hang over the railings of the two upper tiers to watch Indian dancers below.

Iron Eyes Cody was there, beating a drum for the dancers. He's the Indian in the print and television ads who weeps because of pollution.

Cody obligingly signed autographs and posed for pictures. To a black woman snapping him he said, "You have no flash." She said, "I know. It probably won't come out." Cody shook his head.

Tina and James Spotted Elk came all the

way from Rosebud, S. D. for the opening of the turtle. They declared it "good."

Alberta Lounsbury was there. She's a Tuscarora and her home on Rainbow Boulevard in Niagara Falls is bulging with Indian guests, here for the opening.

Mrs. Lounsbury and other Tuscaroras have watched the construction of the turtle-shaped building for five years, often feeling a little left out.

But now, more Tuscaroras have jobs at the center. Mrs. Lounsbury was among 3,000 Indian guests at a special party Saturday night. Sunday she said, "Unity. That's what's important. Besides, it's beautiful."

The \$5 million center is by Indians for Indians. Three of the founders, Huron Miller, Duffly Wilson and Richard Hill, were inconspicuous as they walked among the mob of people. The crowd was bigger than they'd expected, a little overwhelming.

"Almost too many," Hill said. Because of

the numbers of people, it was nearly impossible for anyone to stand still long enough to appreciate the fine paintings, sculpture and weavings.

Most of the attention focused on the floor of the amphitheater where Indian dancers performed hour after hour. Cody and three other men beat the drum for the ritual dancing. Non-Indians joined whenever invited, and sometimes when they weren't, so that bodies circling around the floor included dancers in fine feathers and hand-sewn leather garments and others in street wear.

There was a constant press of buyers in the gift shop where prices ranged from \$6 for a tiny sweet-grass basket to \$4,000 for a brass cougar by Charles Pratt. There were pieces of Mohawk pottery priced at \$50 to \$70 and higher, and a woven red, black and grey wall hanging for \$600. A stone sculpture of an eagle by Laurie Archer was priced at \$300.

native american center for the living arts, inc.
(716) 284-2427, 25 rainbow mall, niagara falls, new york, 14303

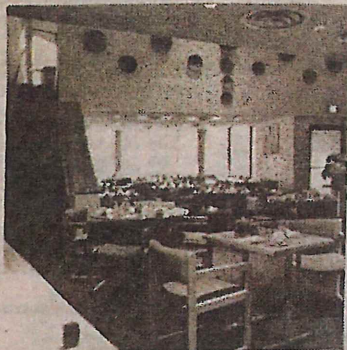


the
"TURTLE"



The "Turtle" is a \$6M, nationally acclaimed facility that serves the public with outstanding museum collections displaying the heritage and culture of the Iroquois Indian, the National Indian Art Gallery which displays and promotes the contemporary art of the American Indian artists, and a Performing Arts Amphitheatre, unique itself, where theatre, music, and dance performances are presented. Five years in the making, the "Turtle" has grown to be a place where traditional culture is preserved and contemporary arts are enhanced.

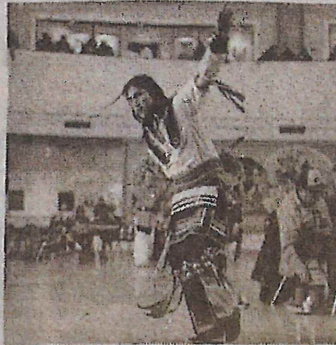
The "TURTLE" is the proud host of the "Rainbow Country '84 Fishing Fair"



Turtle Gallery Restaurant

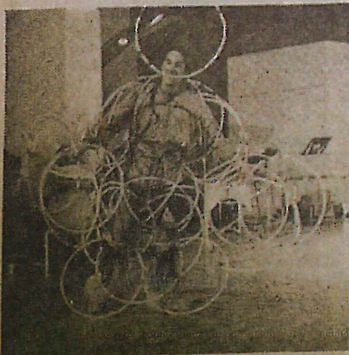
Casual family dining with a view, the Turtle Gallery Restaurant overlooks the Niagara Rapids. Daily specials complimented with a Prime Rib Special and also Sunday Brunch. Banquets up to 600 are welcome. Open until 8:00 pm. For reservations call 284-4867

Iroquois dance performances daily
April 1, 1984 - September 30, 1984



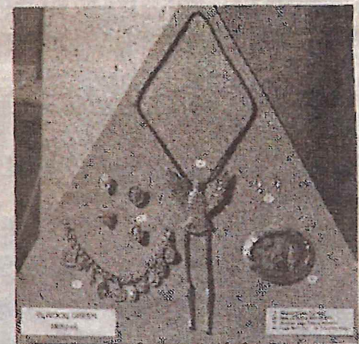
Coming May 19 & 20, 1984

3rd Annual All Indian POW-WOW



THE NATIVE AMERICAN CENTER
for the LIVING ARTS, INC.
THE TURTLE
25 Rainbow Mall
Niagara Falls, New York 14303
(716) 284-2427

HOURS OF OPERATION:
SUMMER: (May 1 thru Sept. 30)
9:00 am - 5:00 pm
WINTER: Tues.-Fri.: 9:00 am - 5:00 pm
Sat.-Sun. 12-5 pm



Turtle Island Craft Shop

The Handicrafts only Native Americans could make. We feature fine arts and crafts, as well as publications on Indian topics. Various Indian Nations of the continent are represented: pottery, baskets, turquoise and silver jewelry, garments, beadwork, moccasins, stone sculptures and wood carvings.



Niagara Falls NY

2-17-2024

Could the Turtle follow Central Terminal path?

By Mark Scheer

Niagara Express (Joe Genco)

Reprinted from the Niagara Gazette

(Editor's note: I don't often lift from the Gazette but when a story is this important, and well told, sometimes I have to.)

While Niagara Falls awaits a city council decision on a proposal to designate the "Turtle" building as a local landmark, preservationists in the City of Buffalo are celebrating a step forward in a decades-long effort to resurrect a long-vacant building of historical and cultural significance on the city's East Side.

Local and state officials announced earlier this month the selection of a development team for Buffalo's Central Terminal building.

The Buffalo News reported that the team, led by Queens-based CB Emmanuel Realty, will be in charge of a 10-year, \$300 million state-supported plan aimed at turning the Art Deco complex, built as a train station in 1929, into an entertainment and residential "East Side hub."

The naming of the preferred development team followed the June 2022 announcement from Gov. Kathy Hochul that the state, together with "philanthropic supporters," including the City of Buffalo and the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, agreed to contribute \$61 million to help cover construction costs.

The project represents the culmination of a grassroots preservation effort led by residents and community leaders who came together to save the building from being demolished. Their effort led to the creation of a non-profit group, the Central Terminal Restoration Corp., that acquired the building in 1997.

Over the years, members — many working on a volunteer basis — undertook clean-up projects and performed routine maintenance at the site while hosting various public events designed to raise funds and awareness about the building's existence and its potential.

Among them: Carl Skompinski, a Buffalo resident who, in recent years, has turned part of his focus to advocating for preservation of the former Native American Center for the Living Arts — a building built in the form of a Turtle — on Rainbow Boulevard in Niagara Falls.

Skompinski believes a stabilization and restoration effort similar to the one that took hold at the Central Terminal building could be possible for the Turtle, which has been vacant since it ceased operation as a Native American arts center in 1995.

Skompinski said the Turtle has some advantages the Central Terminal did not, including a much smaller footprint in need of redevelopment. He also believes the building is in better overall condition than the Central Terminal was when the restoration corporation first acquired it.

"I think it has so much potential," he said.

An important part of the process involves establishing a planning or steering committee that would work in a redevelopment plan. He believes, given the structure's history, involving indigenous groups and representatives would be an important piece of such an effort.

"There's a movement for this type of activity where there wasn't in the past and there's funds to be had, both public and from foundations, that can help move this project forward," he said.

Monica Pellegrino Faix, a Niagara Falls resident who is the executive director of the Central Terminal Restoration Corp., sees an "interesting parallel" between what happened with the old railroad hub on Buffalo's East Side and what could happen with the Turtle building if the right combination of public and private support comes together in the Falls.

While critics of the effort to landmark the Turtle building have questioned doing so without having a viable redevelopment plan for it first, Pellegrino-Faix noted that in instances like the Central Terminal or the Richardson Olmsted campus, another large-scale, state-supported redevelopment project in Buffalo, what comes first is often recognition by the community that a particular building is regarded as a "special place."

The Turtle building, in her eyes, meets that threshold.

"I think the Turtle is just a really special place to so many people and it has a really important location in our downtown," she said. "Who can deny it's a very cool building?"

The building and the situation it is in reminds Pellegrino Faix of another structure on Pine Avenue — the former Niagara Falls High School building — which years ago was slated for demolition by the Falls school district before residents and local preservationists stepped in.

Today, she noted, the building is home to the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center.

"A group of people said, 'This is something important to us, to our community, this means to something to us and our people. We have to do something with it,' she said. "You don't necessarily need a use in those early years, you just need to say, 'This is important to us.'"

Pellegrino-Faix conceded that, not unlike preservation efforts at the Central Terminal or the NACC, the process will take a lot of hard work from a lot of different people.

The key, she said, is having a building left to preserve, which is why she views the local landmarking of the Turtle building as an important step for the building's future.

"It took from 1997 when the Central Terminal not-for-profit acquired the property until about 2019 to really move it into the place where it is now, where there is more of a reality that (the redevelopment) will happen," she said. "In those interim years, it was really about saying this is a special place and this special place is embedded in a community that really cares about it and we should really find a redevelopment and find a reuse."

News on the advancement of Central Terminal restoration comes as city officials consider a local landmark designation for the Turtle building that was endorsed in a 6-0 vote by members of the Niagara Falls Historic Preservation Commission earlier this month.

The commission's decision must be ratified by a majority of the members of the Falls city council for the designation to become official.

Falls lawmakers are scheduled to consider the request to make the designation official during Wednesday's council meeting.

The building's owner, the private firm Niagara Falls Redevelopment, has made it clear that it opposes landmarking the building. Through its attorney, the company recently submitted in writing a list of concerns about the legality of the move.

Chief among them: The building's age. NFR's attorney argues that state historic preservation status has exclusively been granted over the years to buildings 50 years old and older and, as a structure that's been around for about 42 years, the Turtle building should not qualify.

A representative from Preservation Buffalo Niagara has said that while that may be the case, there is no law against applying landmark designation to a structure that is less than 50 years old.

In a letter to the editor that was published in the Niagara Gazette, NFR's long-time Executive Vice President Roger Trevino noted that the Turtle building operated as the Native American Center for the Living Arts for less than a dozen years and it failed because "there was no ability to make the facility financially viable."

"Thanks to NFR efforts, the property was, and remains, back on city tax rolls. Since purchasing the property, NFR has paid more than \$1.3 million in taxes to the city, county and school district – in addition to the original purchase price," Trevino wrote.

In his op-ed, Trevino argued that the Turtle building — at 67,000 square feet — is "just too big to support the kind of cultural center some preservationists desire."

Trevino also indicated that NFR has made “numerous efforts” over the years to develop the site and spent “considerable expense and several years” attempting to establish a Smithsonian-affiliated museum inside.

In the end, Trevino indicated that the company, “couldn’t find any financially viable Native American group” with an interest in moving the project forward.

NFR representatives have said that they are open to working with the community at large and the indigenous community in Niagara Falls on cultural preservation efforts.

As to the idea of the Turtle possibly following a similar path to redevelopment as the Central Terminal in Buffalo, Haggerty said: “We have no information on state funding for an effort to renovate the old Central Terminal in Buffalo and how it might relate to any future viability of the Turtle structure for development.”

Niagara Gazette GUEST VIEW: Feb 1, 2024

Niagara doesn't need another Robert Moses mindset

As Niagara Falls residents witness the ongoing removal of the Niagara Scenic Parkway that divides the city from the Niagara River, it's worth looking back on the devastating effects resulting from a "just tear it down" mentality. Robert Moses ripped through the Niagara region at will, not only building a power plant but scouring Goat Island, remaking the waterfront, and — tragically — gutting the Tuscarora Reservation.

The Niagara Falls Preservation Commission is weighing a proposal to designate the Turtle, site of the former Native American Center for the Living Arts, a historic landmark. At a public hearing on Jan. 18, residents spoke loud and clear: the Turtle is important, not just for the past but for the future. Not just for tourism or even history, but — more importantly — for the community itself.

Native high school students spoke passionately about the cultural and historical meaning the Turtle holds for them. Native spokespeople who interact with tourists at Fort Niagara spoke of tourists' interest in native culture and the lack of places to send them for a deeper experience. The Turtle can be an enlightened center that reflects a renewed vision of Niagara's history, a learning center for tourists from around the world and an important gathering place for cultural events by the falls.

Niagara Falls historic preservation guidelines aim to, among other goals, "Protect and enhance the landmarks and historic districts that represent distinctive elements of Niagara Falls' historic, architectural and cultural heritage" and "support and stimulate the city's economy." No one can deny the Turtle's historic legacy and its architectural vision. A Native American arts and cultural center in the Turtle would support the city's economy. And it would provide a community gathering place near the falls for citizens themselves.

Some opponents of the Turtle preservation point to the arts center's closing in 1997 as evidence that the idea of a native arts center in Niagara Falls is doomed. But the closing was a product of multiple factors, not just an organizational collapse. It didn't happen in a vacuum.

Niagara Falls was hit hard by the worldwide recession in the late '80s and '90s.

But more than that, there were political tensions that created a backlash against Native Americans, totally opposite the better relations that had existed in 1977 when the native arts center was dedicated. The issue of state taxation of sales to non-Indians on the reservations was inflammatory. Significant New York State land claims were still unresolved. The federal Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was passed in 1988, and there were heated battles over opening casinos in the state. In 1997, the New York Times even reported a "white backlash" against Indians over these issues. What cultural center could withstand all that?

So — where do we go from here? Hopefully, times are different. Hopefully, attitudes are more open and enlightened. Past failures should not prevent future efforts. We owe it to young people to give them an opportunity to see that history matters and that their culture matters. As evidenced by the hundreds of support letters and thousands of petition signers supporting the landmark designation, there are people and organizations willing to work to create a plan for the Turtle.

There is no cohesive plan to preserve any of the work that has been done to show layers of history around the falls. A new hotel on that site would compete with existing businesses like the wonderfully restored Giacomo Hotel in the old United Office Building and the venerable Red Coach Inn. Where the Turtle's head now stands, there would be a private hotel offering a great view of the falls to its paying guests — but no one else. It would be a throwback to the 19th century when people had to pay to see the view.

Remember Niagara's history. Remember how much has been lost. The Preservation Commission has the opportunity today to offer a breathing space, a pause, a chance to reassess the question of whether Niagara Falls will preserve what is most valuable in its culture and history or allow a latter-day Robert Moses mindset to take what can't be restored.

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