

Niagara Falls, Indigenous elders see dream of what comes next

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Vacant for decades, the future of the Native American Center for the Living Arts – best known as "The Turtle"
Buffalo News file photo



Oren Lyons (right) with the late Haudenosaunee Tadadaho, Leon Shenandoah (left) and John Lennon and Yok
Courtesy Rex Lyons

Dennis Sun Rhodes was almost 1,000 miles away earlier this month, when the Niagara Falls City Council voted 3-1 against giving formal landmark status to the Turtle, a building Sun Rhodes – an internationally celebrated architect – envisioned and designed, a short walk from the upper rapids and the falls.

Though [Sun Rhodes](#) hopes to visit soon, it would have been almost impossible for him to be at the meeting. He lives in St. Paul, Minn., where he's dealing with severe effects from diabetes.

Still, he joins two old friends – Rick Hill, longtime artist, writer and historian from the Tuscarora Nation, and 94-year-old Onondaga faithkeeper Oren Lyons – in at least sharing this hope:



*Architect Dennis Sun Rhodes at the opening of American Indian Hall at Montana State University in 2021.
Kelly Gorham/Montana State University*

The Turtle is really both a dream and a story, and to fully understand means remembering the way it came to be.

In that sense, Sun Rhodes said, “Its time is forever.”

The council vote rejected a preservation commission recommendation to give the building landmark status. James Perry, council chair, voted against the designation, a move he said was philosophical.

The Turtle has been owned for years by a private firm, Niagara Falls Redevelopment, which opposed the action. Perry said he doesn’t believe in telling private owners how they must develop their property.

He said he wants the Turtle to survive, preferably as a museum or entertainment venue, but he would need to see hard plans, with financial backing, to be won over.

The fear among the Friends of the Turtle – an alliance of supporters, pushing for restoration – is a revival of some form of [a 2017 NFR proposal to build a 16-story hotel on the site](#).

"It's an aesthetic masterwork," said Tim Johnson of the Six Nations territory in Ontario, speaking of the design by Sun Rhodes. Johnson, born in Niagara Falls, retired as associate director at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian – and said his own career in managing museum programs began 43 years ago, at the Turtle.

I reached Johnson during a packed conference he organized on climate change at Six Nations alongside Hill, a longtime friend. With Lyons, they were central players [in creating the Haudenosaunee flag](#), born at Johnson's father's T-shirt shop in Niagara Falls – and they all spoke to what they see as the most painful contradiction of the Turtle:



In Niagara Falls, the Turtle – with its four paws, a tail, a great dome for its shell – features a head whose gaze is always drawn toward the falls in a reflection of Indigenous culture. Buffalo News file photo

It was founded through a kind of unexpected lightning strike by a group of Indigenous artists, Hill said, who had passion but weren't ready for the financial scope of a major arts center. Almost a half-century later, there's a far deeper native framework of national expertise for making this kind of operation fly.

Today, the building – created, as Lyons said, not to be a museum but as an Indigenous space for “living arts” – is long out of their hands.

Hill and Lyons were among a small coalition of native artists, representing the Six Nations, who in the 1970s turned a Third Street storefront into an Indigenous gallery, studio and meeting place. The effort was led by Hill's uncle, Duffy Wilson, a Tuscarora sculptor who had been part of a similar dream in New York City.



*Oren Lyons is an Onondaga Nation faithkeeper and one of the artists involved at the beginning of the Turtle.
Harry Scull Jr./News file photo*

One day, Hill said, two grant writers walked into the little center and said: There's a chance to win a \$5 million federal grant for a monumental arts project – but only a few weeks to put together an application.

They pulled it off. Asked to submit a vision for the building, Hill remembers Wilson doing a small sketch of a turtle – which both meshed with an Haudenosaunee creation story and was the clan to which Wilson's wife Margaret and their children belonged, according to Wanda, their daughter.

"The turtle is a huge symbol for us," said Lyons, who has traveled the world on behalf of the Haudenosaunee. "Turtle Island goes to the foundation of the Earth itself."

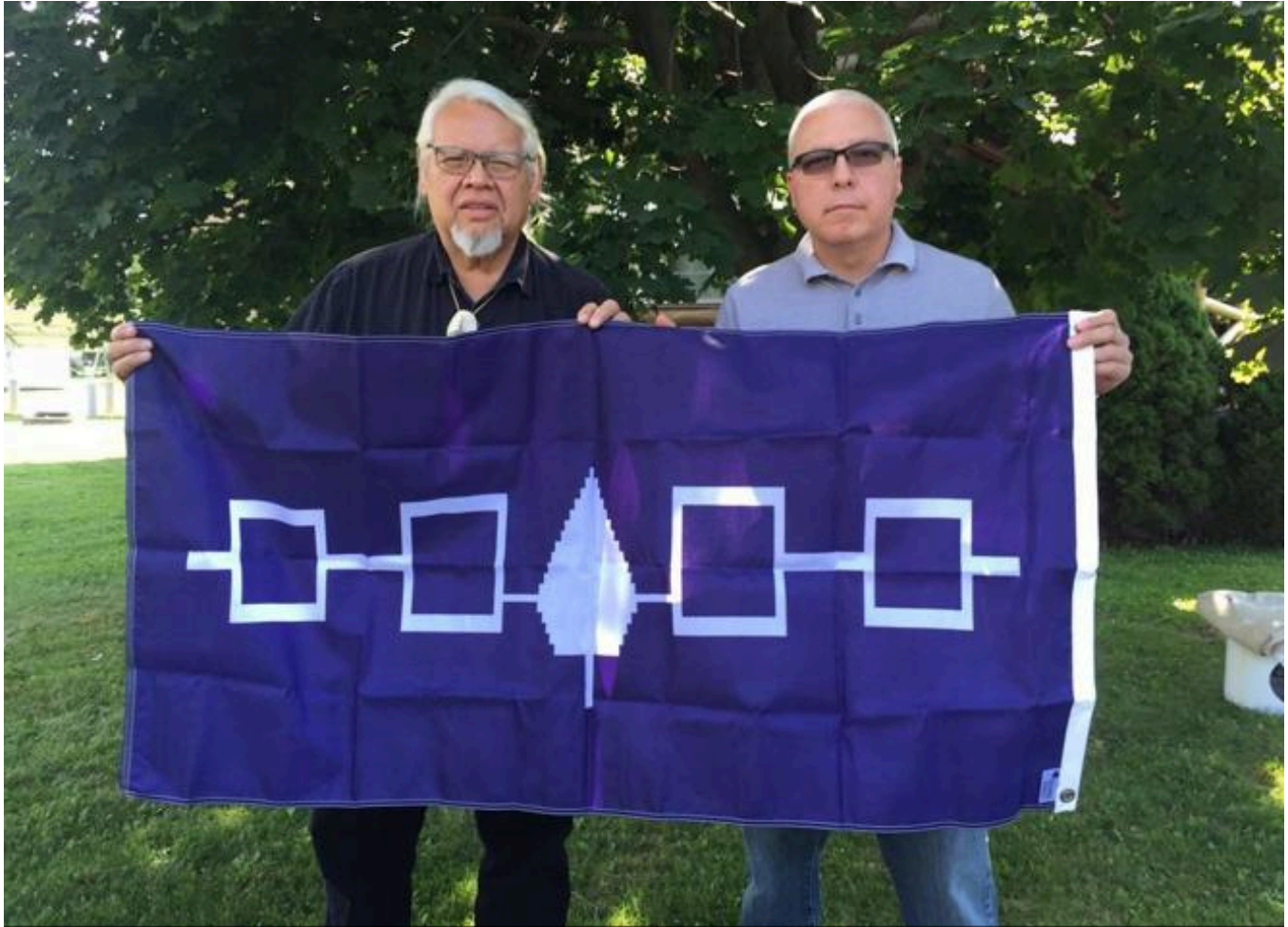
During that same period, Sun Rhodes recalls meeting Duffy Wilson at a conference. Wilson explained his vision for a turtle-shaped center for the arts, which Sun Rhodes – already a groundbreaker in Indigenous architecture – embraced and brought to life.

Sun Rhodes is Arapaho, raised at the Wind River territory in Wyoming. At Montana State, he was drawn toward the late Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural belief that design "should reflect organic indigenous practices that were authentic to the place itself," as described by Jessie Fisher, executive director of [Wright's Martin House](#) in Buffalo.

To Sun Rhodes, that wasn't theory. It was cognizance, since birth. The birds and animals, to him, were all part of one design. In Niagara Falls, he created a vast turtle with structural paws, a tail, a great dome for its shell – and a head whose gaze is always drawn toward the falls.

So much in the city, Hill recalls, was already dying or fading out, despite the wonder of Niagara. There had been talk of putting the entire Indigenous arts operation at Artpark, but Hill said Wilson believed passionately it could be a unique catalyst in the city's South End.

“We were making our claim: This land is Haudenosaunee,” Hill said. He and Lyons dreamed that Indigenous artists and visitors from this country and beyond would see the Turtle and the falls as what Johnson describes as an "international beacon" of identity and creativity.



Rick Hill, a Tuscarora artist and educator, and Tim Johnson, retired from the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, with the flag of the Haudenosaunee, or Six Nations, they helped create. They both worked at the Turtle, in its early years.

Photo courtesy of Tim Johnson

While Johnson said the Turtle offered some extraordinary programming, it never escaped financial trouble in its 15-year run. It finally closed when the Internal Revenue Service seized much of its artwork and artifacts in 1995, seeking back payment for federal taxes.

“They hauled everything away,” said Hill, who had left the Turtle years earlier. Lyons said he scrambled to get his paintings out of the building – including “[Maid of the Mist and the Thunder Beings](#),” an image of the falls through a Haudenosaunee lens that’s now displayed at the [National Museum of the American Indian](#).

A wistful Hill speaks today of “a great dream that misfired.” While he went on to a long and ongoing career in the arts, he and Johnson both say the same opportunity now – at a different time, with a much deeper level of organizational wisdom – could have a profoundly new outcome.

But the Turtle is shuttered. Hill said the sense of loss and sadness is so powerful he rarely will even drive past it.

“Sometimes you’ve got to try something else,” Hill said. “And there was never a something else.”

Yet Michael Martin, a spokesperson for the Friends of the Turtle movement, said the council's decision to deny landmark status won't stop the effort at a revival. He still hopes for common ground with all the principals, "hopeful the good mind will prevail."

Martin, an Onondaga, is executive director of Native American Community Services of Erie and Niagara Counties. His organization's interest in "reawakening the Turtle," as he puts it, goes back for years – though stalled for a time by the pandemic.

He remembers touring the structure in 2016, and while he said the long dormancy has taken a toll, the damage was not as severe as he feared.

"It's such an iconic building," said Martin, who saw landmark status as a firewall against any attempt at demolition. He said an alliance of arts and civic groups will move forward with a vision of saving the Turtle as a center of Indigenous art, culture and values – and they're already assembling "a plan that would be successful and sustainable for a long time."

Within the Haudenosaunee, Lyons said, the falls represent "a huge central story about life itself," which is what Sun Rhodes said he attempted to reflect. There's always a need, Lyons said, for a "place for native art that's foundational for us," but only a few of the Turtle's founders remain alive, and he said the building's fate comes down to this:

At 94 – part of a generation that spent a lifetime in lifting up Indigenous identity, in countless ways – he gently trusts this struggle to the hands of all those who come next.