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Niagara Falls' Turtle building added to national 'endangered places' list

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Di Gau of the National Trust for Historic Preservation announces Wednesday that the former Native American Center for the Living Arts building has been added to the group's 2025 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

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A grassroots effort to reawaken the building commonly known as "The Turtle" in downtown Niagara Falls has picked up support from a 75-year-old nationwide preservation organization that specializes in saving unique places across America.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation announced Wednesday that it has named the turtle-shaped former Native American Center for the Living Arts building to its 2025 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

The group's designation describes the Turtle as a "powerful symbol of Indigenous heritage," while noting, "Unfortunately, the building has been vacant for almost 30 years, and the owner previously shared plans for demolition. A coalition has formed in hopes of 'reawakening' the Turtle once again."

Sites are selected by the trust based on historical significance, architectural importance and severity of threat faced. Placement on the list can help raise awareness about a site, which can help mobilize financing and support for local preservation efforts.

"As we approach the 250th anniversary of the United States, we must acknowledge and support the Indigenous history that has so often been hidden and forgotten," said Carol Quillen, president and CEO of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "The plans to 'reawaken' the Turtle would provide exactly the celebration of tribal heritage and culture that we need more than ever."

Di Gao, senior director of research and development for the National Trust, joined members of the local group, Friends of the Niagara Turtle, in formally announcing the building's designation during a press conference on Wednesday at Cataract House Park across the street from the former Native American arts center in downtown Niagara Falls.

She likened the designation to "an act of hope" aimed at spurring wider interest in the effort to preserve and reopen the Turtle.

"Over its four decades of existence, the list has become a highly effective tool for sharing the stories of some of our nation's most captivating sites and galvanizing public support for over 350 places and we're proud to say, after they've been included on this list, only a handful have been lost," Gao said.

Opened in 1981 as a center for celebrating Native American arts, the Turtle building has been closed and vacant since 1995. Northern Arapaho architect Dennis Sun Rhodes designed the building in the shape of a turtle to honor the Haudenosaunee creation story that the Earth was built on the back of a Great Turtle. The three-story, 67,000-square-foot building, located at 25 Rainbow Blvd., features a geodesic dome roof "shell" and large porthole "eye" windows.

"The Turtle is a powerful symbol of Indigenous heritage and was once a hub for fostering education, cultural preservation and community healing," Gao said.

"We've included the Turtle on the endangered list because it has now been vacant for nearly 30 years and is not yet a locally designated landmark. Yet these walls hold community memories and promise for future generations."

The building is currently owned by the private company, Niagara Falls Redevelopment, which previously opposed efforts to have the building designated by the city as a local landmark.

NFR did not immediately respond to a request for comment, however, the company has previously indicated through its spokesperson that any potential for future renovation would depend entirely on the proposed use and that the company has not received "viable interest" in redeveloping the site since it acquired it from the city in 1997.

The local non-profit group Friends of the Turtle was formed in the wake of the Niagara Falls City Council's decision to reject a request by the city's Historic Preservation Commission to have the building designated as a local landmark. The Friends are receiving support in their efforts to "reawaken" the Turtle from Preservation Buffalo Niagara, a local group that works to preserve historic and culturally significant sites across Western New York.

Supporters of the preservation effort say the building embodies the self-determination and preservation of the Haudenosaunee who, in the mid-1970s, embarked on the Turtle's construction as part of an effort to preserve their arts and culture after the negative impact of the Indian boarding schools and centuries of the United States Government controlling nearly every aspect of tribal life.

They also view the building as a prime and exceedingly rare example of a cross between Postmodern and Indigenous architecture. Preservationists say the building's design blends Postmodern approaches to anthropomorphism in conjunction with meaningful Haudenosaunee symbols and practices embodied in the function and form of the building.

Friends members say their coalition includes more than 1,000 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and that they have engaged extensively with the Haudenosaunee Nations and other Indigenous communities who are interested in revitalizing the building as a cultural resource. Plans for the building could include re-establishing it as a cultural center offering exhibitions, dance and music performances, and educational experiences highlighting Native American heritage, culture, and languages.

Shaun Wilson, a member of the Mohawk and Turtle Clan who serves as the chairman of the board for the Friends of the Niagara Turtle, said he believes the Turtle could come alive and thrive once again as a center for celebrating Indigenous culture and arts, partly because times have changed a lot since the building closed in 1981.

Wilson believes a new group of operators would greatly benefit from something the earlier operators did not have: Access to the world through marketing and promotion on the internet. He said he believes operators of the building would be in a much better position today to attract visitors and support for an Indigenous cultural center inside a unique building that would be unlike any other attraction of its kind, not just in New York but in the United States.

"I think, historically, the Turtle was, looking back on it, it probably could have been welcomed by the community more," he said. "It was a different time when it did operate. It was the first building of its kind and something like this here in New York state could have the Indigenous community re-learning its culture in this building. We have the community today that could operate this building."

Wilson said his group is working with local architect John Baptiste from Anowara Architecture as it moves forward with the preservation initiative. He said a key step in the process will likely involve a walk-through that would allow for a closer examination of the building's condition, which Wilson said Friends of the Turtle members have been unable to do to date.

While he acknowledged the potential cost of renovation may be high, Wilson said Friends members are hoping that by increasing the public's understanding of the

significance of the Turtle, they will be able to put together a "viable" plan that the building's owners have said no one has been able to produce.

"We had to start somewhere, so we started with community awareness and that there's potential to save the building," Wilson said.