

Niagara Gazette

EDITORIAL: Landmark the 'Turtle?' Why not?

Mark Scheer February 22, 2024

We're not quite sure what to do with the former Native American Center for the Living Arts, the building in downtown Niagara Falls commonly known as "The Turtle."

We know what we would not have done with it for the past couple of decades and that's let it languish on Rainbow Boulevard across the street from the entrance to Niagara Falls State Park, a place where state officials now say more than nine million people visit per year.

Why is it worth saving now? First off, the building is shaped like a turtle.

There aren't too many buildings like it in America or even the world.

The turtle's run as a Native American arts center lasted from 1981 to 1996. The building was acquired from the city by a Niagara Falls Redevelopment subsidiary in 2000.

It's been vacant now for nearly 30 years, the bulk of those years under the ownership of NFR, a company owned by the Milstein family. NFR has purchased more than 100 acres in the last 30 years and has little to show for it in the form of development.

Recently, NFR representatives have made it very clear that they do not agree with an effort led by members of the city's historic preservation commission to designate the Turtle as a local landmark.

Landmarking the building would not result in the company losing total control over the building's future. Rather, it would apply an additional layer of protection by preventing NFR from tearing it down without first proving that the structure's deteriorating condition requires an emergency demolition.

Critics argue that it makes no sense to designate a building for preservation when nobody has a viable plan for its reuse.

We say that's a pretty short-sighted argument, the kind that led to the demolition of many structures of historical, cultural and architectural significance in this city in the past.

Remember when preservationists tried to protect the old Johnny Ryan's building on Niagara Street from the wrecking ball and a majority of city lawmakers voted against it, suggesting a Tim Hortons would be built in its place?

Years later, the property remains vacant.

Good luck getting a cup of coffee there.

What if this city did the same with the old Niagara Falls High School building, now the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center, one of the few truly vibrant places left along an otherwise deteriorating Pine Avenue business district?

How about the former United Office building?

Some may recall it, too, was owned by NFR before the state acquired it and sold it to local developer Carl Paladino who renovated it and revived it as The Giacomo Hotel.

How much more desperate would the downtown landscape be if the old United Office Building had been razed?

Over in Buffalo, a group of residents and preservation advocates got together way back in 1997 to purchase the old Central Terminal building on the city's East Side.

At the time, they weren't sure what they were going to do with it, they just knew the building mattered to them and that it was a unique structure worth saving.

Fast forward to earlier this month when the non-profit Central Terminal Restoration Corp. celebrated, along with Gov. Kathy Hochul, the naming of a development team that will be responsible for leading a \$300 million public- and private-financed effort to renovate the building as a community and residential hub.

Can a similar process play out involving the Turtle building in Niagara Falls?

One thing is certain: If steps aren't taken to preserve the building and it does end up getting torn down by monied, outside interests, the residents who make up the community of Niagara Falls and Western New York will never know what might have been.