

Friends of Niagara Turtle mourn loss of building's designer

Arapaho architect Dennis Sun Rhodes died Thursday

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Supporters of an effort to reawaken “The Turtle” in downtown Niagara Falls are mourning the loss of one of the building’s creators.

Dennis Sun Rhodes, the Arapaho architect who worked with Tuscarora sculptor Wilmer “Duffy” Wilson to help design the former Native American Center for Living Arts on Rainbow Boulevard, passed away on Thursday.

Friends of the Niagara Turtle, the local non-profit that is working on preservation plans for the building, made attempts in recent years to contact Rhodes and make him aware of their effort.

Rhodes did not weigh in publicly or endorse the idea of preserving the building in recent years.

“We are grateful for the design and joy this building gave both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, as it sits just feet from Niagara Falls,” Friends of the Niagara Turtle board member Carl Skompinski wrote in a message posted to his group’s Facebook page. “We hope to honor his legacy, that of Duffy Wilson, and all those who worked tirelessly within its doors to bring native culture to our community and nations. Remember, this Indigenous Cultural Center pre-dates the Smithsonian’s Museum of the American Indian and was well known throughout North America. May Mr. Sun Rhodes rest in peace.”

Sun Rhodes was born on
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The former Native American Center for the Living Arts — the Turtle building.

James Neiss file

TURTLE

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the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming, according to the website for Montana State University where he graduated with a degree in architecture. According to the university's website, Sun Rhodes went on to become a principal at architectural firms in St. Paul, Minnesota, and over the years developed a reputation for incorporating into his building designs symbolic shapes reflective of elements from Indigenous cultures. In addition to the Turtle building in the Falls, Sun Rhodes is credited for designing buildings for tribes across the country, including the Minneapolis American Indian Center, the Division of Indian Work building in Minneapolis and the Piya Wiconi Building at Oglala Lakota College on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. The turtle building operated as a center for Native American arts and culture from 1981 to 1995. The building is currently owned by the private firm Niagara Falls Redevelopment.

NFR has indicated that it has not yet received any "viable" plans for redeveloping the structure. Local efforts to develop a plan for preserving the building got a boost last month when the National Trust for Historic Preservation announced that it had been added to the group's 2025 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. The group's designation described 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."

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