

CENTERPIECE

A toast for the Turtle building

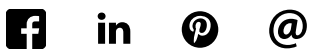
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Cherrish Beals, Robin Smith, Ashin Nanda of the Metta Parami monastery in Buffalo, Sara Antoinette Smith and Shaun Wilson, board president of Native American Community Services of Erie and Niagara Counties, were among those that took part in Friday's ceremony at the Turtle building.

Mark Scheer photos



While many visitors came to Old Falls Street on Friday to take in the sights and sounds of the first day of the Niagara Falls Blues Festival, another group of people gathered a few blocks away to share a toast and offer prayers for a turtle-shaped building they are hoping to preserve, renovate and revive.



More than 40 people, including a pair of unique visitors from the United Kingdom and a group of Buddhist monks dedicated to the cause of peace, participated in a ceremony celebrating the state's recent decision to deem the former Native American Center for the Living Arts on Rainbow Boulevard eligible for placement on the National Register of Historic Places.

Supporters of an ongoing effort to develop a long-term reuse plan for the building, which has been closed to the public since 1995, say the Determination of Eligibility granted last month by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation means developers interested in resurrecting the building would be eligible for historic tax credits to offset the cost.

They also say the designation offers an added layer of protection from the building being razed as doing so in light of the DOE would prevent the property's owners, the private firm Niagara Falls Redevelopment, from obtaining state funds for other projects on the land.

"It really means a lot for us to win this status," said Bernice Radle, the executive director of Preservation Buffalo Niagara, the non-profit group that submitted the eligibility application to state parks. "It's a really big deal."

Robin and Sara Antoinette Smith, visiting the Falls from Herefordshire, England, agreed.

The couple took part in Friday's ceremony after learning about efforts to reawaken the turtle from Cherrish Beals, owner of the Marshall House bed and breakfast on Park Place where they are staying for the weekend.

Sara Smith counts among her family members one of the most important historic figures in Niagara Falls history, John Stedman.



The “Master of the Portage” named Goat Island in the 1770s while assisting the British army in its efforts to reorganize transportation methods for goods along the portage of the Niagara River. He was one of two British soldiers to survive the Devil’s Hole Massacre of 1763. The section of Goat Island overlooking the Bridal Veil Falls and the American Falls is named Stedman’s Bluff in his honor.

The Smiths said they view the Turtle building as not only a unique structure but also one worth preserving due to its ties to Indigenous culture.

“It’s so important to keep our history for future generations and we welcome such an event to lift its profile,” Sara Antoinette Smith said.

Friday’s event also featured a blessing by a group of Buddhist monks who spent three months earlier this year walking more than 1,700 miles from Key West, Florida, to Niagara Falls as a part of the Walk for World Peace project. They led Turtle building supporters in chants intended to ward off feelings of suffering and offered prayers for a positive outcome for the structure.

The three-story Turtle building opened in 1981 as the headquarters for the Native American Center for the Living Arts, an organization formed to promote indigenous visual and performing arts. The center closed amid financial trouble in 1995. The city foreclosed on the building a year later and in 1997, at the city’s request, NFR, a firm owned by Howard and Edward Milstein of the Milstein banking and real estate family in New York City, purchased the property for \$1 million.

Preservationists argue that the turtle-shaped building, which was designed by Northern Arapaho architect Dennis Sun Rhodes, has cultural, historical and architectural value.

Like many other supporters of efforts to preserve the building, Lewiston architect James Paul Baptiste — whose company, Anowara Architecture, uses a sea turtle as its symbol — said he believes the Turtle building remains in “amazingly good shape” considering it



has been closed for decades. Baptiste, whose family is descendant from the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, where he is a registered band member of the Turtle Clan, believes there are numerous reasons why the building is worthy of preservation.

“There are very few examples of zoomorphic architecture and we have one of the very few in the world,” he said.

Just what the future holds for the building remains unclear.

Having the building placed on the National Register would require cooperation from its owner. NFR previously challenged another PBN-led effort to have the structure designated as a local landmark.

While company representatives have not announced any plans involving the potential demolition of the building, they have said their years-long attempts to market the structure have not been successful and have not resulted in any reuse plan that they consider “viable.”

Shaun Wilson, board President of Native American Community Services of Erie and Niagara Counties, remembers visiting the Turtle in his youth and recalls when the building closed when he was a teenager.

He said he got involved in efforts to reawaken the turtle because he believes it could provide something Indigenous Western New Yorkers need — a common place where young and old can celebrate their heritage and culture.

“This generation needs that,” Wilson said.

“Eighty percent of us that are indigenous live off territory,” he added. “A building like this, we could be re-learning our culture. I got involved for those younger than me.”



The Cheektowaga resident, who is a member of the Turtle Clan of the Mohawk Nation, said he's hopeful the project has the potential to be successful.

"I think just reopening the Turtle gives us a chance to relearn the culture that was forcibly removed from our ancestors in the boarding schools," he said.

Niagara Falls Mayor Robert Restaino did not attend Friday's ceremony, nor did four of the five members of the city council, which rejected a bid to have the building designated as a local landmark in a 4-1 vote in March.

The lone lawmaker who supported the landmark designation — Brian Archie — attended Friday's event and said he still believes the Turtle building is worth saving and he said he believes doing so would provide a tremendous boost to cultural tourism in the Falls.

"People are coming together to do a thing and it's hopeful. It's hopeful. It brings hope. That's why I'm here, holding onto hope," Archie said.

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