

The Editorial Board:

## Restore the Turtle to its original purpose of celebrating Haudenosaunee culture

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The Turtle in Niagara Falls was abandoned by the city decades ago. This is a lost opportunity to recognize the region's Haudenosaunee culture and history.  
Buffalo News file photo

Despite its prominent site near the brink of Niagara Falls, the Turtle has been ignored for too long.

The structure's new status – though it's an alarming one – as one of America's 11 most endangered historic places may heighten the chances that this architecturally and culturally significant landmark can survive and find reuse.



### **Niagara Falls' Turtle named to endangered buildings list**

The National Trust for Historic Preservation added the iconic Turtle building in Niagara Falls to its 2025 ranking of America's 11 most endangered historic places, designed to highlight architectural and other "treasures" that are most at risk to demolition or neglect.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation added the Turtle, at 25 Rainbow Blvd., **to its annual endangered roster**, which is intended to highlight architectural and other places of significance that are most at risk of disappearing.

Though not historic under traditional definitions, the Turtle was built in 1981 as the Native American Center for Living Arts. It presented exhibitions, performances and other programming until it closed in 1995. Niagara Falls Redevelopment has owned the structure since 2000.

The Turtle was designed by Arapaho architect Dennis Sun Rhodes to look like a large turtle, its geodesic shell roof pierced with triangular skylights in the form of an eagle. The shape of the three-story, 67,000-square-foot building references the Haudenosaunee story that North America was created on the back of a giant turtle.

That design and the participation of Haudenosaunee leaders and artists such as Rick Hill, Oren Lyons and Duffy Wilson is what made the Turtle a long-awaited center of Indigenous art, culture and values, something urgently needed after centuries of attempts to erase the Indigenous way of life throughout America. Those attempts included infamous boarding schools such as Thomas Indian School on the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation, where children endured physical and emotional abuse during efforts to rob them of their culture.

The boarding schools have been closed for decades, but the scars remain. On Tuesday, Gov. Kathy Hochul visited the Seneca Nation's Cattaraugus Territory to present [an apology on behalf of New York State for its](#) role in the shameful history of such schools.

Apologies are important and needed, but an even more meaningful action might be Niagara Falls and New York State working together to fulfill the original promise of the Turtle. That would be a true commitment to the significance of Haudenosaunee culture.

There is a coalition, Friends of the Turtle, that hopes to move forward with a vision of saving the structure and restoring its original purpose. As the National Trust [stated in the narrative](#) for its endangered list, this group has been “garnering support for revitalizing the Turtle as a cultural resource. The coalition envisions reactivating the building as a cultural center, to include exhibitions, dance and music performances, and educational experiences highlighting Native American heritage, culture and languages.”

Sean Kirst: At long-dormant Turtle in Niagara Falls, Indigenous elders see dream of what comes next



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This would not only be revitalization of a building; it would be another chance to fulfill a dream that was cut short.

In March 2024, Michael Martin, a spokesperson for the Friends of the Turtle, [told former columnist for The News, Sean Kirst](#), that he still had hopes for common ground with all the principals.

But Howard Milstein's Niagara Falls Redevelopment has done little with any of the 200 acres it has owned in downtown Niagara Falls for decades, including the Turtle property. This endangered designation, as well as ongoing efforts by Friends of the Turtle, could help improve that situation.

If the Turtle were to be saved and redeveloped under its original purpose – that of telling the story of Haudenosaunee culture – it would join such sites as the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, two miles north on Main Street, and Youngstown's Old Fort Niagara in weaving a rich and fascinating historic tapestry.