

UB students put Indigenous planning principles into practice for endangered Turtle building in Niagara Falls, N.Y.



UB MUP students Jean-Luc Pierite, Benjamin Bachman and Alaina Oughterson (pictured left to right) have built up a repository of best practices, precedent studies and recommendations to advance efforts to "reawaken the Turtle" as a center for Indigenous culture. Photo courtesy of students

Rachel Teaman April 27, 2026

A group of UB urban planning students in a new course on Indigenous Planning are advancing principle into practice with planning that could help

save one of the region's most historic examples of Indigenous architecture.

Once the largest center for Indigenous art and culture in the Eastern U.S., the distinctive "Turtle building" in Niagara Falls, N.Y., has been dormant for more than 30 years and is listed on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2025 list of America's 11 Most Most Endangered Historic Places.

Completed in 1981, just 15 years after the closure of last residential school to assimilate Indigenous children, the former "Native American Center for the Living Arts" served as a powerful symbol of Indigenous heritage following centuries of U.S. government control of tribal life. The zoomorphic Turtle-shaped building – representing the Haudenosaunee creation myth of earth forming on the back of a giant turtle – hosted powwows and traditional dances, art exhibits and public gatherings before shuttering in 1995 due to funding shortages.

Building capacity from the bottom up

Directing the student project is Dean Seneca, MPH, MCURP, a Seneca Indian and an adjunct professor in both UB's Department of Urban and Regional Planning Department and School of Public Health and Health Professions, who identified the community need as an ideal practice-based learning opportunity for his Indigenous Planning course. The 1990 graduate of UB's BAED program and a practicing urban planner and public health professional [launched the course in 2025](#) to teach future planners the tools and tenets of the Indigenous worldview, from its emphasis on reciprocal relationships to land, to its basis in tribal sovereignty and community participation, to its legacies of culture, tradition, language and ceremony.

"This is why this planning course is so important. We're trying to raise awareness of Indigenous practices while also providing a service that builds capacity for our tribal nations that have little to no capacity in planning," says Seneca, who also serves as founding CEO of Seneca Scientific Solutions+, a

for-profit providing capacity-building research in economic and community development for tribal nations, states, cities and territories.

“It’s really all about relationships – with the land, people, and all living things. Those relationships are reciprocal and circular, not linear like the Western worldview. Indigenous planning attempts to apply these same principles to space and the built environment to support resilience and sustainability.”

The course also takes direction from the “Seven Generations” concept of the Haudenosaunee, the confederacy of six Native American nations originating in New York (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora). The philosophy states that resilience for the current generation lies in intentional action that honors the wisdom and contributions of the generations that came before, and offers accountability and healing to the generations ahead.

Seneca and three graduate students in this year’s course have been meeting regularly with the advocacy group Friends of The Niagara Turtle to identify key gaps in information and analysis in their efforts to restore the building as a center for Indigenous culture. The Turtle is currently owned by an out-of-region real estate development firm that has expressed interest in demolishing the building to make way for a high-rise hotel.

- Dean Seneca (BAED '90), adjunct faculty member in UB's Department of Urban and Regional Planning and School of Public Health and Health Professions

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Advocacy effort gaining momentum

Shaun Wilson, a member of the Mohawk nation and president of the [Friends](#)

[of The Niagara Turtle](#) board of directors, says the research effort comes at a critical juncture for the advocacy group, which he helped to form two years ago after learning about community interest in restoring the building, particularly from local Indigenous youth.

"There are so many of our youth who are just not satisfied with what they've learned about Indigenous history in the current school system and its textbooks. They're craving this knowledge. They are desperate to have a space to go, to relearn their culture. There is a kind of an 'awe' moment when younger people learn about the Turtle. That's what really gives me my energy."

The building, a rare example of Postmodern architecture combined with Indigenous architecture, was designed by Northern Arapaho architect Dennis Sun Rhodes with a geodesic dome roof "shell" and large porthole "eyes." At the height of its operation, the center held a collection of thousands of artifacts and contemporary artworks, a 500-volume library, and a photograph archive. The building is centrally located in downtown Niagara Falls, less than a mile from the most powerful waterfall in North America, which draws millions of visitors from around the world every year.

A testament to the Turtle's significance, representatives from the Smithsonian Institution visited the building in the late 1990s as part of their planning for the Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, completed in 2004. They also hired many of the former Native American Center for the Living Arts' former staff members.

Not unlike the students' planning efforts, the traditions and principles of the Haudenosaunee are embedded in the group's advocacy work, says Wilson. "We're taught by the Haudenosaunee about the Bundled Arrow, that we're stronger together than we are apart. We're following that same principle with our coalition." The Friends of The Niagara Turtle has over 1,000 followers and several nations are represented on the board of directors. The advocacy group is also looking into language opportunities. "We could be relearning

the very language that was forcibly removed from our ancestors inside a reawaked Turtle," he adds.

Bolstered by support from national Indigenous organizations and even the Buffalo-born Goo Goo Dolls, which performed at the Turtle in 1988, the building was determined in 2024 to be eligible for landmark status by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. However, the advocacy group is unable to apply for the designation because it does not own the building.

"It's just a waste; the building has been sitting there empty for 30 years," says Reine Hauser, a local historic preservationist and member of the Friends of The Niagara Turtle board. "The history of the Turtle building has literally and figuratively been whitewashed," she adds, referring to the Turtle's original bold red and green stripes that have been painted white.

"One of the reasons we're so excited about the UB effort is that the students are involved with the built environment," says Hauser. "The Turtle was designed by one of the only practicing Indigenous architects at the time. Even today, there are very few Native American architects," she adds, one of whom, Niagara County-based architect James Baptiste, sits on the advocacy group's board.

Student recommendations center sustainability, social justice

Among the questions being addressed in the students' report are programming possibilities for the structure; strategic partnerships that would link the center to the broader region and its Indigenous community; as well as assessments of potential tourism, economic, educational and cultural impacts.

MUP students Alaina Oughterson and Benjamin Bachman and UB Indigenous studies PhD student Jean-Luc Pierite have built up a repository

of best practices, precedent studies and recommendations to present to the Friends of The Niagara Turtle by the end of the semester. Ideas include clustering school field trips during the winter off-season; offering night sky viewing events; restoring the grounds as Indigenous food gardens that integrate with nearby green spaces; and adding interpretive signage that links the center to an emerging trail of heritage tourism assets in Niagara County, including the Aquarium of Niagara, Niagara Gorge, Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, and Old Fort Niagara.

- Alaina Oughterson, MUP student

The central location of the Turtle is one of its greatest assets. Its proximity to Niagara Falls State Park and the heart of downtown provides an incredible opportunity to draw people into the building, and offers the perfect space to preserve a wealth of Indigenous culture and uplift Indigenous voices that have too long been silenced.

Student Reflections

- Benjamin Bachman, MUP student

Professor Seneca's course has offered clear strategies for incorporating the input of Indigenous communities into the planning process while responding to systemic injustice that continues to affect Native communities. I especially appreciate the assertion that this work cannot wait.

"We're a resilient people, and we're still here."

The offering in UB's Department of Urban and Regional Planning, enrolling graduate and undergraduate students in architecture, planning, Indigenous studies, and environmental design, is part of a growing movement to center Indigenous planning practices with the potential to revive tribal communities beleaguered by a history of cultural violence, resource extraction, intergenerational grief, and a complex web of associated social, economic

and health challenges.

Seneca says the course is also a re-education in American history as experienced by Indigenous peoples, from first contact, to treaties, to the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and forced relocations, to the Dawes Act of 1887 that authorized the federal government to break up tribal lands. It was only 1975 when the federal Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act took a critical first step in the renewal of tribal self-governance by giving Native tribes agency over issuing contracts for federal services like schools, youth and senior centers, and cultural institutions.

"We haven't had the ability to plan, and now we do. We're a resilient people, and we're still here," says Seneca. "We still need to heal from these atrocities, to create the vulnerability that allows for openings to new ideas, new planning methodologies and a more sustainable relationship to the environment."

- Jean-Luc Pierite, Indigenous Studies student affiliated with the Tunica-Biloxi tribe of Louisiana

Working with Friends of The Niagara Turtle is an opportunity for hands-on experiential learning that deepens community engagement...My hope is that this project can be iterated upon to deepen relationships towards dismantling Indigenous erasure.

Seneca says this is just the first of many real-world projects that UB can take on through the course to support Indigenous communities. "Today, local, county and city governments are starting to recognize Indigenous planning and are reaching out to tribal nations that are doing indigenous planning."

"That UB and the School of Architecture and Planning took the step to launch this course, one of only a handful in the U.S., speaks volumes to our local Indigenous communities and on a national level, says Seneca.

According to Friends of The Niagara Turtle, the building was part of a rebirth of Indigenous culture when it was completed in 1981 as one of the first places of gathering for Indigenous communities off tribal lands. Today, the advocacy group hopes to ride this wave of renewed interest in its preservation to finally "reawaken the Turtle."

"You often only see the Indigenous community speaking about this building, so we get excited by efforts like this because it gives an opportunity for the non-Native community to learn about this building and roll up their sleeves and get involved. This thing is right here in our own backyard," says Wilson.

- Dean Seneca

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