

The Editorial Board: Buffalo is trying to save its landmarks; Niagara Falls should do the same

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The Turtle in Niagara Falls was abandoned by the city decades ago. While Buffalo is making attempts to preserve and celebrate its history, Niagara Falls neglects its own.

Buffalo News File Photo

Chronic negligence, speculative ownership and empty promises can have disastrous results on the urban streetscape. Both Buffalo and – to a far greater degree – Niagara Falls have suffered from this lethal combination.

The latest two examples are located in waterfront areas that hold great recreational and historic potential – potential that increases if distinctive elements that speak to local history are kept intact. The fates of 110/118 South Park Ave. in Buffalo and the former Native American Center for the Living Arts, aka Turtle, in Niagara Falls, are not connected in any literal way, but the way these structures have been ignored and abused forms a symbolic kinship.

The major difference between them now? While the City of Buffalo is **stepping up by using eminent domain measures** to rescue the South Park buildings from an owner who has done nothing to maintain them, the Turtle, located at 25 Rainbow Blvd., adjacent to the state park, was abandoned by Niagara Falls decades ago.

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Since 2000, it's been owned by Niagara Falls Redevelopment, which holds 142 acres of prime downtown property in the Falls, none of which shows any sign of being redeveloped. The Niagara Falls City Council recently rejected its own Historic Preservation Commission's recommendation of local historic landmark designation for the Turtle, though Council Chair James Rhodes has stated that he wants the structure to survive.

Landmark status would help save the Turtle from demolition, a protection that is key to survival.

A symbol of Iroquois culture

Even though the Turtle, built in 1981, is not historic under traditional definitions, if it were to be saved and redeveloped under its original purpose – that of telling the story of Iroquois/Haudenosaunee culture – it would join such sites as the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, 2 miles north on Main Street, and Youngstown’s Old Fort Niagara in weaving a rich and fascinating historic tapestry.

The three-story, 67,000-square-foot building 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 building references the Haudenosaunee story that North America was created on the back of a giant turtle.

It was only open as a cultural center for 14 years and closed in 1995, having struggled after it lost state funding in 1988.

As News columnist Sean Kirst **wrote in a recent column**, the Indigenous artists who founded the Turtle in the late 1970s, “had passion but weren’t ready for the financial scope of a major arts center. Almost a half-century later, there’s a far deeper native framework of national expertise for making this kind of operation fly.”

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A project by the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area features four new text-based murals on a stretch of Main Street in Niagara Falls.

Since acquiring the structure, Niagara Falls Redevelopment has made a few announcements over the years – redeveloping the existing structure as a museum was one plan and tearing down the structure to build a spa and hotel was another. It's been six years since NFR's last "plan," and it's no surprise, given this company's record in the Falls, that the Turtle remains vacant and untouched.

Hanging by a thread

The Turtle still looks like a turtle, but the structures at 110 and 118 South Park Ave. in Buffalo barely resemble buildings. That's how far their deterioration has gone under the negligence of owner Darryl Carr.

These 1852 (110) and 1869 (118) buildings are the sole survivors of a commercial sector that thrived along the Buffalo waterfront in the 19th century. Their presence is a central reason that the Cobblestone Historic District is locally landmarked. Their preservation and reuse will forward ongoing efforts to honor and interpret Buffalo's crucial history as a commercial port and gateway and benefit the continuing evolution of Canalside.

That story and, of course, the importance of holding a negligent owner accountable, are reasons to approve Buffalo's eminent domain process, which gained an initial court victory on March 15. It is not a strategy to be undertaken lightly, but, in this case, no other choice remained if the structures are to be saved.

If Niagara Falls loses the Turtle, it should remember that it, too, had a similar chance – one it declined to take.

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