

The Niagara Arts and Cultural Center, Niagara Falls, NY
Community Anchor, Institutional Driver, Core City Asset

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Since its inception in 2001, the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center has held a prominent place in the city of Niagara Falls, NY. It is at home in the former Niagara Falls High School building, occupying an entire city block bounded by 13th Street to the east, Pine Avenue to the north, Portage Road to the west, and Walnut Avenue to the south in Niagara Falls. The original intent for the old High School was that it be torn down when a new one was built; the monumental 180,000 square foot building had been slated for demolition. Thanks to a committed community grass roots effort, the building was instead redefined, renamed, and adapted for re-use as the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center. (See *The Grand Lady: From High School to Arts and Cultural Center*.) While the fate of the building was at the heart of much controversy early on, currently most of the community is enthusiastic that the old Niagara Falls High School has a new purpose as an arts and cultural center. In taking a leadership role in the city and regional arts community, the NACC continues to be integrated with the community, its people and its plans. This analysis describes the NACC's role in the community since its inception through its current place in the 2008 Comprehensive Plan for City of Niagara Falls, USA.

The original name of the organization was Save Our Sites in Niagara Falls, INC. Its original purpose was to save and preserve community and historic structures with the City of Niagara Falls and its environs in order to preserve the cultural and social heritage of the area, of which the Niagara Falls High School was the first. In December 2000 the Preservation League of New York State announced the inclusion of the former school building on its *Seven to Save* list, a collection of historic locations in New York that the group believes must be preserved. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002, as Former Niagara Falls HS (# 01001507.) Early on it was established that the Board of Directors of Save Our Sites in Niagara Falls- and then the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center- was

in fact the developer for the NACC, to include protecting the landmark building, preserving arts and cultural heritage, and promoting arts and cultural experiences in the community. The earliest by-laws stated “the Vision of the NACC is to enrich the lives of artists, residents and visitors thru its mission to creatively transform the largest historic building in the city into a cultural center that inspires, educates, enlightens, and engages the community and its visitors through the arts.” Though this statement has been altered in the first 10 years, the commitment to inspiration through the arts and engaging the community and visitors through the arts has never wavered.

The name of the organization was officially changed to The Niagara Arts and Cultural Center in 2004 because by then the only site that had been saved and the only one the Board of Directors had the stamina to develop was The Niagara Arts and Cultural Center. Since 2001 the Board of Directors, a small staff, and dedicated volunteers worked tirelessly growing the NACC. With incredible perseverance the NACC consistently demonstrates what can be done through the vision and passion of committed people and the renewing power of the arts.

The NACC is a land lord to a variety of artists, arts & cultural organizations, and arts & cultural related groups. By the end of the third year as The NACC, all available rooms (mainly former classrooms) had become rented studio spaces, and the large common areas had become repurposed. There is currently a waiting list for arts space at the NACC, with over 70 spaces rented. Since 2002, over 130 gallery exhibitions have been hosted in the Main Gallery (the former cafeteria) and the Garden Gallery (the former front entrance). The Woodbox Theater (the former library) and the Grand Theater (the former auditorium) are venues for a variety of performances. The front steps of the building are the stage for the City’s Sunday Jazz series on Sunday evenings in the summer each year. The NACC offers a place where diverse groups, who represent a wide range of ages, racial and ethnic groups, with different income levels come together to explore the diversity of the arts and their people.

In 2004 the NACC received a \$1.9 million five year 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) grant. This allowed them to create an after-school and summer program for community youth ages 7-18, to create jobs and hire over 30 local residents, and to hold events for the community. A very important part of the mission for the NACC is to “offer arts and cultural education and presentations to the community.” This granting period was crucial to the NACC in its growth as a significant positive feature in the community, while the community became an integral aspect of the NACC as well.

When the NACC was invited to become a member of the New York Multi-Arts Center Consortium (NYMACC) in 2006, its caretakers (both internal and the public) realized just how they had grown organically into a community multi- arts center. Multi-arts centers serve diverse populations with a common mission to serve their communities through the arts and to enhance the quality of life, both economically and socially. With over 50 centers represented in NYMACC, the NACC is the largest at 180,000 square feet (the smallest is 1800 square feet.) It is a model for historic preservation that helps to safeguard the legacy of the city of Niagara Falls, and its people. Five generations graduated from the old Niagara Falls High School and the history of the building mirrors the history of the city. There are many people who take pride and ownership in the building; it was “their high school,” it is in “their neighborhood,” and the many early volunteers know that they “helped save the building.” With this on-going community support, the NACC successes have become their successes as well.

What began as an effort to save a building in 2000, has grown into a movement to stabilize and revitalize a neighborhood in the City of Niagara Falls, NY. This momentum was featured in the Day in Niagara session, hosted by Niagara Falls NY, during *Alternating Currents* National Preservation Conference held in Buffalo, NY in October 2011. The Niagara Arts and Cultural Center hosted the session titled “Neighborhood Revitalization” in Niagara Falls, NY. The tour featured the NACC and surrounding vicinity with the explanation “The Center acts as a community anchor of the Memorial Park

Neighborhood (MPN), a historic early downtown neighborhood that includes the Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center (NFMCC). Key to the revitalization of this city, MPN is within easy walking distance to the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center, Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center, the YMCA, libraries, grocery stores, churches, the city market, Niagara Falls, and most importantly public transportation.” The tour group visited the NACC, the historic Schoellkopf Park across the street owned by the hospital, the Memorial Park Neighborhood Block Club President’s home one block over, the former Holy Trinity Church, and the falls themselves. Holy Trinity Church was closed as part of church consolidation, and has become a 501 c 3, historic preservation, organization that is dedicated to maintaining the group of three buildings and using the site for the benefit of the community, including hosting theatrical performances. The falls are located within a mile of the NACC.

The City of Niagara Falls urban planner who joined the tour, referred to the NACC, NFMCC and surrounding Niagara Falls Memorial Parkway Neighborhood as being about “ten years behind Allentown in Buffalo, NY.” Allentown is an historic arts district in the city of Buffalo- a thriving urban center and tourist destination. The Allentown Association describes it as “Simultaneously high society and bohemian, the Allentown Historic Preservation District located in Buffalo, New York boasts one of the best examples of urbanism in Western New York.”

Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center has been part of the Memorial Park Neighborhood for more than 100 years. Founded in 1895 by community leaders and residents who recognized the need for healthcare services in the city of Niagara Falls, the hospital’s city campus is located on Tenth Street at the corner of Pine Avenue. Memorial’s 171-bed inpatient facility, its 120 bed skilled nursing and rehabilitation facility and Schoellkopf Park occupy the entire city block bounded by Tenth Street to the west, Pine Avenue to the north, Portage Avenue to the east and Walnut Avenue to the south. In 2006, NFMCC began a campaign to restore Schoellkopf Park to its original beauty. Restoration was

completed through funding from many generous donors. The park is widely utilized by community residents, patients of the Schoellkopf Health Center and other visitors. It has hosted annual concerts and “Arts in the Park,” a collaborative venture with the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center.

The Memorial Park Neighborhood (MPN) is represented by the MPN Revitalization group consisting of community activists and representatives from the NACC and NFMMC working together to improve the neighborhood surrounding the hospital and the NACC. In fall 2006 MPN Plan was developed by University of Buffalo graduate planning students as part of their practical studio planning project, in cooperation with the NACC and NFMMC. Planning students researched pertinent case studies of similar neighborhood revitalization efforts around the country, performed an analysis of current Memorial Park Neighborhood site conditions, demographics and historic information. A neighborhood survey was also conducted to ensure community participation and better understand the perceptions and thoughts of neighborhood residents and business owners. In an effort to achieve a vision for MPN, the University of Buffalo graduate Planning Studio specifically investigated the following key elements [with a brief descriptor of each] to address identified points of concern and provided recommendations for restoring the fabric and vibrancy of the community:

- Institutions [NACC and NFMMC act as community anchors]
- Transportation [accommodate automobile, develop pedestrian walkways]
- Housing [combination of homes with great potential and poor housing conditions]
- Commercial [three commercial corridors located in MPN]
- Green Space and Parks [lacks sufficient park, green space and greenway connections]
- South Junior (abandoned school) [currently idle but offers a variety of opportunities]
- John B. Daly Boulevard [a viable future neighborhood including new housing]
- Haeberle Plaza [shopping plaza of suburban design]

This MPN Plan developed by the University of Buffalo graduate planning students is the plan that guides the MPN Revitalization Group today.

The Niagara Arts and Cultural Center, Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center, and Memorial Park Neighborhood each have prominent places in the *Comprehensive Plan for City of Niagara Falls, USA, 2008*. The original version of the 2008 plan was completed in 2004 by Urban strategies, Inc., which served as a basis for updating the City's 1994 Comprehensive plan. The 2008 plan adds a section titled "General Citywide Strategies." The planning process included input from a variety of constituents, including the NACC, NFMCC, and MPN. The forward to the plan describes it as "the blueprint for our future, engendering the principles and guidelines that will influence our city's development in the coming years. This is not an ordinance; it is not a code book. It is a plan, intended to encourage thoughtful urban design and city building reflective of the community's vision and leading to a city that we can all embrace and enjoy."

In ""setting the stage for renewal" the Comprehensive Plan addresses 40 years of economic and industrial decline, serious employment and population loss, misguided renewal initiatives that removed residential and commercial stock in the heart of the city, and a fragmented down town core and communities. Today the city faces many urban neighborhoods in decay, large areas of abandoned industrial corridors, disappointed and unimpressed visitors in a city that is adjacent to Niagara Falls, a world class natural heritage destination. The tone changes, thankfully, with a look at positive initiatives that have taken place in more recent years such as the establishment of USA Niagara Development Corporation, a subsidiary of Empire State Development, which t is solely dedicated to the support and promotion of economic development initiatives in Niagara Falls by leveraging private investment and encouraging growth and renewal of the tourism industry in the City of Niagara Falls. The Seneca Nation's Casino is located in the heart of the City of Niagara Falls. A re-licensing agreement with the New York Power Authority was reached which provides the municipality with new sources of revenue to be used for carefully considered 'catalyst' projects, and streetscape improvements are being made. In

2011, an agreement was reached with Niagara County Community College (NCCC) to house NCCC's new Hospitality and Tourism Center and Culinary Arts Institute in the former Rainbow Mall.

Niagara Falls has a number of "key drivers and opportunities that have tremendous potential to contribute positively to the future of the city." The NACC and NFMMMC are key institutions within the "Core City" listed as two of the unique assets not found in other parts of the city, along with The Falls and the Niagara Falls (Reservation) State Park, and others. They are referred to as two of the places that "must be strengthened and leveraged to bring about growth and renewal to the whole city." Specifically the Plan states "The Falls and the adjacent tourism precinct, the airport, the Memorial Medical Center, the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center, post-secondary institutions, commercial spines and main streets and Core City heritage communities represent key drivers and resources that can be leveraged to strengthen the social, economic and cultural fabric of Niagara Falls. These Core City assets must be strengthened, supported and nurtured to maximize not only their individual potential, but the synergies and linkages between them as well, by building intelligently and carefully upon each." (pg. 17).

Tourism is referred to as the most important and immediate growth sector for Niagara Falls. Arts and Culture play a pivotal role in tourism. According the Comprehensive Plan "Over time, investments in arts and culture, associated programming, venue and retail development within the Core City, providing an outlet for the celebration of local culture, will help to support the diversification of the tourism and economic base and promote the development of a culturally unique and rich environment attractive to both residents and visitors." (pg. 19).

In the section Toward A New Direction for the Future, the first Principle for City Renewal listed is to build on core assets. Both the NACC and NFMMMC are listed. "Niagara Falls must build and capitalize on its existing assets and leverage these to initiate social, economic and cultural renewal. These include the city's role in the regional economy as the tourism destination; the Niagara River and its vast

riverfront setting including the Falls and the Gorge; regional health care facilities and other institutions, including the Memorial Medical Center, Niagara Arts and Cultural Center, Niagara University and Niagara County Community College; the city's collection of heritage buildings, neighborhoods and traditional commercial districts; and existing industrial clusters, transportation infrastructure, and locational incentives." (pg. 27)

The Niagara Arts and Cultural Center takes its status as a Core-City asset very seriously. It's commitment to being a partner in neighborhood and regional revitalization is both unwavering and consistent. Partnering with others is at the foundation of the NACC's mission to "protect the landmark building, preserve cultural heritage, and promote regional arts and cultural experiences." It is embedded in the "awe" of the NACC's vision "to embrace the cultural heritage of the past, present, and future as an awe-inspiring multi-arts center. " In this vein, the NACC recognizes itself in the 8th Principle for City Renewal to build strategic partnerships and promote a common agenda to undertake 'catalyst' projects. The 8th principle states "The active and ongoing participation of all those with a stake in the future of Niagara Falls must be sought and encouraged to achieve renewal and the City must work to ensure benefits are shared with the entire community. Achieving the many projects and initiatives recommended in the Comprehensive Plan will require the City to pursue a number of partnerships with the public, private and non-profit sectors. Partnerships represent a new way to plan, achieve, prioritize and implement city-building initiatives while strengthening support for renewal within the community and helping to overcome the history of isolated decision-making and self-contained, stand alone projects."

Through the years, the NACC has built partnerships with numerous organizations. Shared goals and adherence to the City of Niagara Falls Comprehensive Plan has made planning and sustainability development stronger for every partner involved. The NACC has moved beyond its doors by

participating in city events, collaborating with NFMCC on the development of an Arts Health Corridor especially utilizing Schoellkopf Park, being an active member of the Memorial Park Neighborhood planning group as well as being consulted regarding plans for the development of John Daly Boulevard neighborhood. Through the years NACC personnel have considered the NACC as a developer of first itself and then in helping to develop and revitalize the surrounding community. From early on there have been hopes, discussions, and organic movement toward creating an Arts District in the city, with the NACC as its hub. Today, the NACC is working with the city and other partners in the creation of the Arts District with the NACC as its Institutional Driver.

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